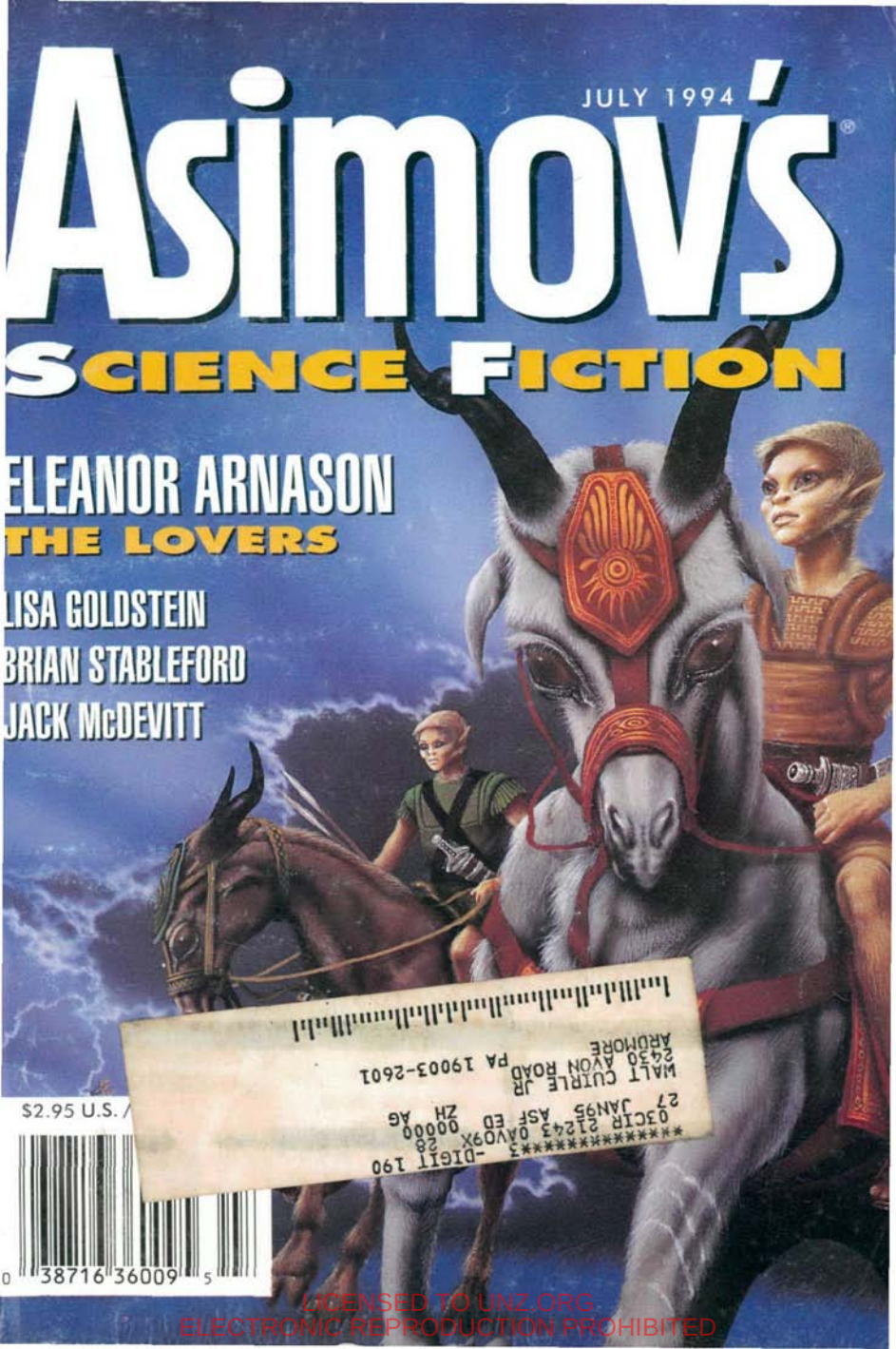

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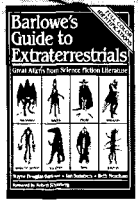

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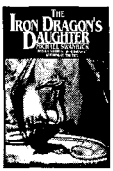

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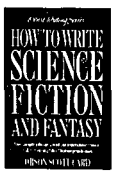

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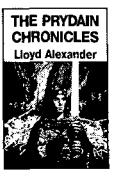

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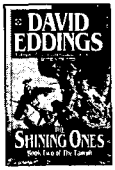

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Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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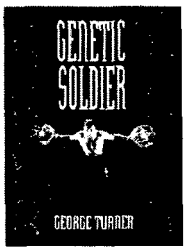

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REFLECTIONS by Robert Silverberg

It was just about sixteen years ago—the spring of 1978—that I took upon myself the task of writing a regular column of commentary on the science-fiction scene. The magazine that invited me to sound off was called *Galileo,* which was pretty much a shoe-string operation, published out of Boston by a bunch of people whose main excuse for publishing it was that they loved science fiction, and edited by the ambitious and determined Charles C. Ryan.

I suppose you would have to call *Galileo* a semi-pro operation, considering its irregular publishing schedule, its not-quite-ready-for-prime-time format, and its basically subscriptions-only distribution scheme. But so far as its editorial content went it was as professional as any SF magazine of its era—including *Asimov's,* which was all of one year old at the time, and just beginning to hit its stride. Looking through my file of *Galileo,* I see its contents page studded with names such as Connie Willis, Joan D. Vinge, John Kessel, Alan Dean Foster, and Lewis Shiner, all of them in the early years of careers that soon would glow with high accomplishment. Veterans like Brian Aldiss, Harlan Ellison, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Jack Williamson had stories in it too; and there were non-fiction pieces by the likes of Carl Sagan, Arthur C. Clarke, Hal Clement, and Frederik Pohl. All in all, it seemed to me a fine place for me to set up shop in as a pontificator.

I very much wanted to do some pontificating, too. After a quarter of a century as a professional science-fiction writer, I had wandered into a time of personal and creative crisis that had led me, late in 1974, to retire from writing "forever." A great deal of my motivation for walking away from my career had to do with the changing nature of science-fiction publishing in the United States in the mid-1970s. The exciting revolution of concepts and literary technique that had acquired the label of "The New Wave" had failed in a big way; the ambitious work of the writers who were considered to be part of the New Wave was swiftly going out of print, and what was coming in was the first surge of Star Trek novelizations, Tolkien imitations, juvenile space adventure books, and other highly commercial stuff that I had no interest in writing or read-

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ing. I felt crowded out by all the junk; and, having also hit a period of mental burnout after years of high-level productivity, I was too tired to fight back against the overwhelming trend toward more juvenile SF. So I simply picked up my marbles and walked away, intending my disappearance from the field to be permanent.

When Charlie Ryan approached me about doing a regular column three and a half years later, I was still deep in my irrevocable and permanent retirement, but I had begun to feel as though I were living a weirdly posthumous existence. It was apparent to my friends, if not yet to me, that I was growing increasingly troubled and confused by my extended period of self-imposed silence. Although I had had plenty of offers to write my kind of science fiction on quite generous terms, I wasn't yet ready to get back into the business of writing fiction again; but I wanted to write *something,* if only to re-establish my connection with the field of fiction that had been the center of my imaginative experience since my boyhood. The truth was that I missed science fiction and my role in shaping it. I could no longer bear to be invisible, after so many years at the center of things. So I accepted *Galileo*'s invitation to do a regular commentary piece gladly and eagerly, and with some relief.

I wrote six columns for *Galileo* before the magazine vanished with its sixteenth issue, dated January

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1980. By then my retirement from fiction had ended—I was working on a long novel called *Lord Valentine's Castle* when *Galileo* went under—and I was definitely back in harness with the bit between my teeth. Scarcely had *Galileo* been laid to rest but I had an offer from Elinor Mavor, then the editor of the venerable *Amazing Stories,* to move my column to her magazine. Which indeed I did, beginning with the May 1981 *Amazing;* and there it has remained ever since, through a change of publisher, three changes of editor, one change in the column's name (from "Opinion" to "Reflections"), and a total transformation of the magazine's format. Thirteen years, issue after issue, Silverberg spouting off on this topic or that for something like a hundred columns.

Now *Amazing* has gone into what is described as a "hiatus," at least for the next year or two. If its past record is any guide, it will eventually reappear, reborn in phoenixlike fashion; I hope so, for it is the oldest magazine we have, dating back to 1926, and I would hate to see it disappear permanently. But right now there's no assurance of its return; and, caught without a podium for my orations and accustomed after sixteen years to holding forth, I have transferred the site of my column to *Asimov's* herewith.

You will find me in this space from now on, relentlessly commenting on this or that, month in and month out. Some of you will find the column a source of endless amusement, stimulation, and delight. Some of you will detest everything I have to say, up to and including my punctuation. My goal is to keep the population of the former group bigger than that of the latter group; but you won't ever find me aiming for a hundred percent audience satisfaction. The only opinion column that can please every reader all the time is a column that specializes in the blandest, most uncontroversial of ideas—one which tells the readers things that they already know and approve of. I don't intend to do that.

If you disagree with an opinion I put forth, please feel free to tell me about it. I'm always willing to engage in further discussion. If you catch me in an error of fact, sing out about that, too. I can be very gracious when I apologize for a mistake. Even the late great Isaac Asimov wasn't completely infallible, and I make no pretense even of approximating Isaac's command of all knowledge. (I'm pretty sharp, though, so far as guys with sub-Asimovian IQs go.) By all means, then, write in. I'm perfectly willing to engage in public dialog with you. This isn't Internet, exactly, but we can be interactive here too, within the pitiful Gutenbergian limits that the print format imposes on us. (You can reach me % *Asimov's Science Fiction,* Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York 10036. Even if you happen to have a more direct address for me,

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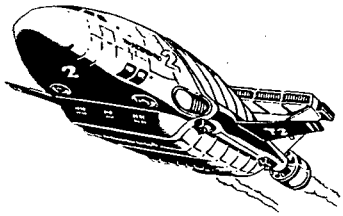

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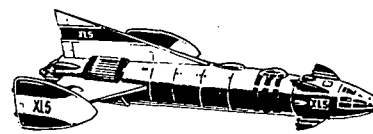

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I'd rather see letters concerning this column going to the magazine, so that the people at the editorial end of things have access to them too.)

I was sorry to have *Amazing Stories* shot out from under me. I'm very happy, though, to have so quickly found a new home, to mix the metaphors, at *Asimov's*. If I must say goodbye to *Amazing*'s editor Kim Mohan, with whom I had the most harmonious possible relationship for the past three years, well, I find myself saying hello to my old friend and long-time colleague Gardner Dozois, and to the cheerful and good-hearted and formidably efficient Sheila Williams, and to all the other fine people who help to make this magazine the distinguished publication that it is. (The one thing I regret is that the pages I now will occupy in this magazine are those that used to belong to one of the oldest and most beloved of my friends, and I know that you know who I mean. I would gladly send this column into limbo ten times over, and plenty else besides, if by so doing I could put the Good Doctor back in charge of it.)

As I look back at that first 1978 column in *Galileo,* by the way, I'm struck by how things have changed in sixteen years. The era of big-money science-fiction books had just arrived. "The financial returns for today's science fiction pros are astonishing by comparison with those of just a few years ago," I wrote, observing that the book that might command a publisher's advance of a few thousand dollars in 1972 would now routinely draw twenty thousand dollars or so, with the best-known writers getting two and three times as much. Of course I applauded all this prosperity for writers—but also I said, "I do feel some qualms about the ease with which young writers can make themselves self-supporting these days," noting the cases of several writers (myself included) who were injured artistically by having things a little too easy in their formative years.

Things are running the other way today, at least in SF. (Fantasy, a branch of imaginative literature that was a neglected step-child genre when I was younger, but which eventually came to dominate the field, still appears to be thriving.) Book publishers are cutting back their science-fiction lines, or discontinuing them entirely. The best-known writers are still prospering, thank you, but a lot of the newcomers of a decade ago who gave up full-time jobs to turn out trilogies by the carload lot are now trying to find those jobs again. In sharp contrast to 1978, these are anything but jolly times for most science-fiction writers. No one worries about being spoiled nowadays by too much easy money.

Boom and bust, boom and bust: the old, old story. We're in the down part of the cycle now. If past experience is any guide, things will turn upward before long, and

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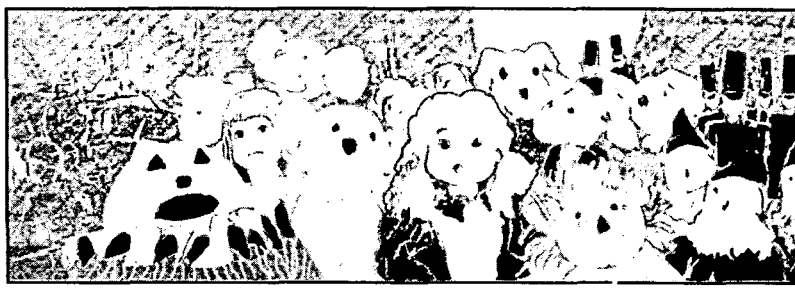
eventually the field will be so robust that there'll be giddy euphoria leading to overproduction and another collapse. If past experience is any guide, that is. But is it? Or are we finally entering the long-heralded post-literate age, where books and magazines slide down into obsolescence and storytellers for a new breed of electronic media will be in demand?

I'll have more to say about these topics, and a good deal else, in the months ahead. ●



THE PLAYROOM

In the playroom
all the dolls converge,
lullaby robots and runaway clowns,
Barbie clones,
rag princes and gypsy kings,
the beanbag pumpkin,
slumber owl and the tiki man.
They seige the floor
and conquer
windowledge and shelf.
Their goals:

a) marshal neighboring forces including aliens, elves, trolls, ninja turtles, paratroopers, fingerpuppets, bears, the Simpsons, and Walking Wanda
b) rescue all those entombed in various packages
c) corrupt the nutcrackers
d) master the aerodynamics of toy planes
e) kill the cuckoo clock
f) claim the balcony and beyond for all Dollkind

—Wendy Rathbone

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Lisa Goldstein

THE NARCISSUS PLAGUE

Lisa Goldstein's haunting short story, "Alfred" (*Asimov's*, December 1992), is currently a finalist for the Nebula award. A collection of Ms. Goldstein's captivating tales, *Travelers in Magic*, will soon be coming out from Tor Books.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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The man in the tollbooth had the Narcissus Plague. "We moved when I was nine," he said earnestly. I held my dollar out to him, watched it sway in the breeze. "My dog never did get used to the new house. One day he got out and chased the mailman up a tree. No one was home, and the neighbors had to call the police. . . ."

Finally he took my money and I sped away. A minute later, I looked in my rearview mirror and saw that the car after me was still trapped at the booth. A narrow escape, I thought. I checked my oxygen mask and surgical gloves and hurried toward the newspaper office where I work.

I parked in the lot and rode the elevator up to my floor. "Hi, Amy, how are you?" my editor, Thomas, asked. This is the only way we greet each other now. It's meant to assure other people that we can still take an interest in them, that we don't have the plague.

"Fine, how are you?" I said. He followed me down the hall toward my cubicle.

"Hi, guys," my co-worker Gary said, heading toward his desk. "I stayed up all last night working on that article you wanted, Thomas."

We turned and watched him go. If it had been anyone else in the office we would have worried about the plague, but Gary has talked about nothing but himself for as long as any of us can remember.

"Listen—I've got an assignment for you," Thomas said. "Someone at one of the labs says she's come up with a cure."

"A cure? You're kidding me," I said.

"I'm not, but it's possible she is. That's what I want you to find out. Her name's Dr. Leila Clark."

He gave me the doctor's address and phone number, and I hurried to my desk to call. To my annoyance an answering machine came on. "Hello, you've reached the office of Dr. Leila Clark. We can't answer your call right now, but if you leave your name and number I'll get back to you just as soon as I go visit my boyfriend. He said he was going to break up with that other woman, but I bet he hasn't done it. He's been saying he'll break up with her since last winter, when I caught them at our favorite restaurant together—"

I hung up. The chances for a cure did not look good.

The lab turned out to be on the other side of the park from the newspaper's offices. The sun had risen above the clouds; it was turning into a warm, beautiful day. I decided to walk.

The fountain in the center of the park was stagnant, green algae lapping at the rim. Its filtering mechanism had clogged; it was making strange mechanical whimpering noises as it tried to get the water to circulate. The person responsible for fixing it probably had the plague, I thought. It only took about a week for the virus to render you unfit for

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anything but talking about yourself. Things were breaking down all over the city.

The Narcissus Plague had not always been this virulent. Ten or twenty years ago people talked about the Me Generation, the Greed Decade, as if those things were normal, just human nature. But about six months ago the virus mutated, became far stronger. Shortly after that a team of doctors isolated the virus they think is responsible for the plague.

My boyfriend Mark was one of the first victims of the more virulent strain. At the time I had no idea what was happening to him; all I knew was that he had changed from the concerned, caring man he had once been. "What makes you think I'd be interested in your old girlfriends?" I'd asked him angrily, over and over again, and, "Why don't you ever ask me how my day went? Why do we always have to talk about you?" Now he lives with his mother, sitting in his old room and talking eagerly to anyone who comes by. I try to visit him about once a week.

I came to the end of the park, found the laboratory offices, and went inside. The receptionist area was deserted, but I heard laughter and cheering from somewhere within. I went past the receptionist's desk and down a hallway, following the sounds. A group of men and women were gathered in one of the offices. Glasses and bottles of champagne lay strewn across the desk; they had probably gone back to their offices and quickly lifted their oxygen masks for a celebratory drink.

A woman turned toward me. She was young, with blond hair braided down her back and a white lab coat with "Leila Clark" stitched on the pocket. "Hello, Dr. Clark, how are you?" I said. "I'm Amy Nunes. The paper sent me—"

"How are you?" the woman said. "I'm Debra Lowry." Her voice sounded a little slurred, but even so I thought that I'd heard it before. She looked down at her lab coat and laughed a little too loudly. "Oh, sorry—we've been celebrating. This is Dr. Clark."

Another woman detached herself from the group. She looked more like someone who'd made a major medical discovery, a woman in her mid-forties, with long black hair streaked with gray and tied back in a pony-tail. "Hello, how are you?" she said. "I sent word to all the papers, but you're the only one who seems to have shown up. I suppose everyone else must be out with the plague." She stretched out a gloved hand, realized she was still holding a champagne glass, and set the glass down.

"I tried calling—" I said. I shook her hand, glove touching glove.

"Things have been a little hectic here," she said. She took a folder from a stack on the desk and gave it to me. "Here—this handout will give you the details."

I opened the folder; it had the kind of scientific detail so beloved by

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our science section. I took out my tape recorder and turned it on. "You say this is a cure for the plague?"

"Yes."

"But how can you be sure it works?"

"Everyone I've treated so far has recovered." Dr. Clark played with the champagne glass on her desk. "You see, I was almost certain I'd discovered a cure, but I needed subjects to test it on. Of course we couldn't experiment with animals—they don't seem to get the plague, or if they do, it takes a form we can't understand, since they don't communicate by using language. So I asked everyone working here if they would sign a release form." She waved her hand, nearly knocking over the glass. "They all agreed that if they got the plague, I could administer the drug. Our receptionist Debra was one of the people who manifested symptoms."

Debra nodded. "So she gave me a pill—"

"You're the one who did the answering machine message!" I said, recognizing her voice.

"Oh my God!" Debra said, and ran down the hallway.

"You see, you don't remember what happened to you when you've been ill," Dr. Clark said. "After you recover, it seems a blur to you, as if it happened to someone else."

"How soon will your drug come on the market?" I asked.

"Not as soon as I'd like, unfortunately. Because of the crisis, the Food and Drug Administration is moving as quickly as possible, but even at their quickest they're not very fast. And a good many of them are out with the plague. Have you ever tried dealing with a bureaucrat with the plague?"

I nodded sympathetically.

"At the soonest, we'll get FDA approval in six months, maybe a year." She took a bottle of pills off her desk. "Here they are."

The pills—red and yellow capsules—caught the light and shone like jewels. "How long does the cure take?"

"A week. The pills should be taken twice a day. But the results are immediate, within a few minutes of taking the first pill."

"And are there side effects?"

"None that we know of."

I cleared my throat. "My—uh, my boyfriend Mark—"

Dr. Clark shook her head. "I'm sorry—I can't prescribe anything to anyone who hasn't signed a release form. I don't want to jeopardize our standing with the FDA."

She set the bottle back on its shelf. Just fourteen of them, and Mark would be the person he had been before. If I could distract her somehow. . . . But there were at least a dozen people crowded into the doctor's office. There was no way I could get the pills.

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I got some background information from Dr. Clark—where she was born, where she went to school—and made my way back to the office.

Thomas stopped me before I got to my cubicle. "Amy," he said. There was an edge of excitement in his voice I had never heard before.

Because of the plague I never knew what to expect from the paper. Some days the printers run whole sections of autobiography, some days they catch it in time and leave huge parts of the paper blank. "What is it?" I asked.

"Gary got the plague," he said. "You've got to come see this."

"Gary? How can you tell?"

"Come *on,*" he said.

Gary seems to have always had the plague—that is, Gary has never paid attention to anyone else in his life. Unlike the victims of the plague, though, he's always been very sneaky about it, managing to turn the conversation toward himself with all the subtlety and dexterity of a master chess player. Intrigued, I followed Thomas down the hall.

Gary was in his cubicle. So were a number of other people, all of them sitting around his desk and watching him. "I like to be noticed," Gary was saying. "I love it when people pay attention to me. That's what I live for. I have to have someone listening to me and watching me at every minute. . . ."

Almost everyone was trying not to laugh. "One day, I remember, we were sitting around and talking about the president," Gary was saying. "So I started talking about the president too, and then the president's brother, and then my own brother, and finally I got to my favorite topic, myself. Another time I thought that Thomas was getting too much attention, so I went down two floors and had him paged from a pay phone. Then I went back to work—it was much easier to talk about myself after he'd gone."

One of the more enterprising reporters on the paper had turned on his tape recorder. If Dr. Clark had indeed found a cure for the virus Gary was going to have a very hard time living this one down.

"How long are you going to let him go on like that?" I whispered to Thomas.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. He felt to make sure his mask and gloves were in place. "It's almost lunchtime—probably we'll send him home then."

I left Gary's cubicle and went back to my desk. Before I could start on the story about Dr. Clark my friend Barbara knocked on my partition and sat in the room's other chair. "Hi, how are you?" she said.

"Fine. How was Washington?"

"You won't believe it," she said. "The pilot on the flight back got the

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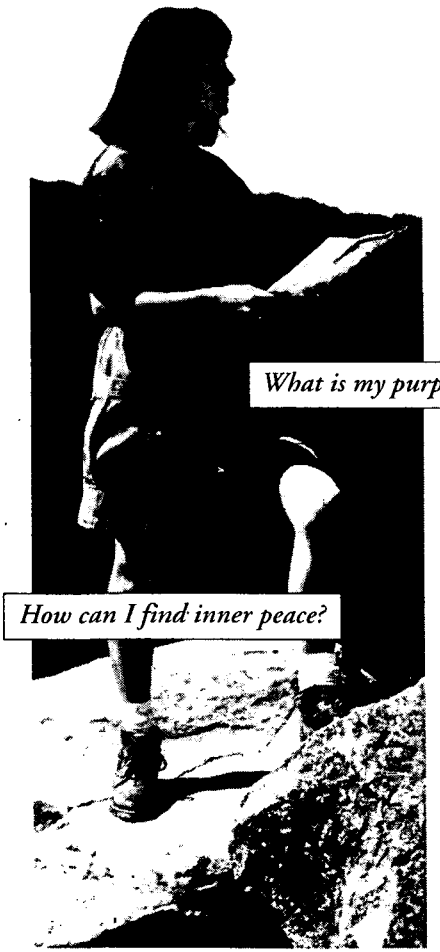

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plague. There we all were, looking out the window or reading our in-flight magazines, and the next minute this guy comes over the intercom to tell us that his fingers are nearly all the same length. On and on—you wouldn't believe how much mileage this guy could get from his hands. Every so often you'd hear a scuffle in the cockpit, where the co-pilot was trying to gain control of the intercom, but the pilot held on grimly all the way home." She sighed. "For three and a half hours. Talk about a captive audience."

"What happened when you landed?"

"Oh, he landed fine. He wasn't that far gone. There was a stretcher waiting for him at the landing gate—I guess he'd bored the traffic controllers too."

"Listen," I said. "I just interviewed a doctor who says she found a cure for the plague."

"Really? Do you think she's on the level?"

"God, I hope so," I said.

I visited Mark after work. I'm not sure why I still see him—I guess I do it out of respect for the person he once was, for the memories I have of our times together.

Mark's mother let me in. Her eyes looked tired over her oxygen mask. "He's in his room," she said, pointing with a gloved hand.

I thanked her and went down the hallway to Mark's old room. He was staring out the window with his back to me, and I stood there a while and watched him. He was tall and thin, with straight brown hair that shone a deep red in the light. For a moment I desired him as much as I ever had before he became ill. Maybe this time, I thought, he would turn and smile at me, kiss me, lead me toward the bed.

Suddenly I realized that he was not looking out the window at all. He was admiring his reflection in the glass. "Hello, Mark," I said. "How are you?"

He turned. He seemed eager to see me. He always seems eager to see me—victims of the plague need other people to talk to. "When I was a kid, we used to turn the sprinklers on on hot days," he said. "All the kids in the neighborhood would run through them. And then the ice cream truck would come, and we'd all go and get ice cream."

He went on in the same even, contemplative tone. He never noticed that my attention wandered, that I looked out the window as often as I looked at him.

When he was well he had never talked so much. He would think before he spoke, weigh each of his words carefully. I had never met anyone before who so clearly meant what he said. Six months ago he had asked me, with no wasted words, if I thought we should move in together.

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He'd gotten the plague instead. And here I was, trying to find the man I loved somewhere within this garrulous stranger. I sighed and checked my watch. I try to spend at least an hour with him.

Finally the long hour ended. I stood up to leave. He looked sad to see me go, but he did not stop his flow of reminiscences. I knew from previous weeks that he was incapable of asking me to stay. In a very real sense I was not a separate person to him. I was Audience.

I said goodbye to Mark's mother and drove home. Once there, I took off my mask and gloves and microwaved a day-old pot roast. When the beep sounded, I took it over to the couch and ate, staring bleakly at my television set. I did not want to turn on the TV; these days, with the plague so rampant, you never know what you might see.

I should call someone, I thought. I should call my friend Barbara. But I'd heard too many stories about people calling old friends who turned out to have the plague.

Still, I looked at the phone with longing. The very first words spoken over a telephone had been words of need, of desire, I thought. "Watson, come here—I need you," Alexander Graham Bell had said. How many times since then had people tried desperately to connect over the phone? Because we do need other people; we need them terribly. What would happen to us if the whole world got the plague?

I opened my handbag and took out the folder Dr. Clark had given me. I had already written and turned in my article, but I wanted reassurance. Could it be that she had actually discovered a cure?

I made my way through her technical explanations. I understood very little of it, but her conclusion was nothing if not clear. "Over a three month period," she had written, "we have treated seventy-nine people with the plague virus, all of them successfully."

I closed the folder. Six months to a year seemed far too long to wait for Mark's cure. Tomorrow I would return to Dr. Clark's office and steal her pills.

Thomas was in a jubilant mood the next day; we'd scooped all the other papers with the news of a possible cure. He made no objection to a follow-up article on Leila Clark. I walked back across the park to the laboratory.

I passed the ragged speaker who sometimes stood by the fountain, exhorting people to come to Jesus. "Yesterday someone gave me a slice of pizza!" he was yelling. "I had just enough money to get a Coke to go with it! Coke and pizza, my friends! Coke and pizza!" He paced back and forth in front of the fountain, his arms punching the air. I gave him a wide berth.

Debra Lowry was sitting at the receptionist's desk. "Hello, how are you?" she said. "You're the reporter who was here yesterday, aren't you?"

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"Yes, I'm Amy Nunes," I said. "I'd like to ask Dr. Clark some more questions. Is she in?"

Debra looked at her calendar. "She's at Channel 7 right now, doing an interview. She'll be back in about fifteen minutes, but only to meet with the staff and pick up her messages. She's got another interview after that."

"Shall I wait in her office?" I moved back toward the hallway.

"I'm sorry—no one's allowed in Dr. Clark's office."

So much for that idea. I sat in a leather-and-steel chair and picked up a *Cosmopolitan* from the glass coffee table. "Men Are Too Much Trouble: How I Learned to Love Myself," the cover said.

The phone rang constantly, all people who wanted to hear more about the cure. I looked at my watch. Fifteen minutes passed, then thirty. Dr. Clark had obviously been detained at Channel 7.

I thought of Mark. I couldn't sit still while the cure, his cure, was only a few steps away. I stood and walked toward the hallway.

"Ms. Nunes," Debra Lowry said, calling after me. "Ms. Nunes!"

I turned. Debra had come around her desk and was hurrying toward me.

Very deliberately, I took off my mask and gloves. "Last summer I went to the Grand Canyon," I said. "It was huge—I've never seen anything so big. I have pictures right here."

Debra backed away. She may have been cured of the plague, but obviously the old fear still lingered. "After I saw the Grand Canyon I went to Yellowstone," I said, moving toward her.

She looked back toward the front door, toward safety. "And then Mount Rushmore," I said. She turned and fled.

I ran down the hallway and into Dr. Clark's office. The bottle of pills was still on her desk. I grabbed it, shoved it into my coat pocket, and hurried out the door. The receptionist area was deserted.

On my way to the elevator I passed a group of people holding microphones and lights and cameras. Leila Clark stood in the center of them. She seemed to be enjoying the limelight; I hoped she'd remembered to sign a release form.

I drove to Mark's house. His mother let me in, surprised and pleased to see me so soon after my last visit. I took a glass from her kitchen, filled it with water. "What—" she asked.

I said nothing, but hurried down the hallway. Mark turned from the window. "Here," I said, giving him the pill before he could say anything. "Swallow this."

He looked into the glass, studying something—his own reflection?—that I couldn't see. "Swallow the pill," I said again, and this time he did.

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"I always dreaded going to school after summer vacation," he said. "I hated having to put on shoes after going barefoot all summer. They never seemed to fit right somehow. . . ."

How long would it take? Would it even work at all? Seventy-nine successes—would Mark be the first failure?

Mark continued to talk. I heard about his friends at school, the ones he liked, the ones he hated, his first crush. I heard about his teachers.

"I never liked getting used to a new teacher," Mark said. "Some of them were nice, but some of them were horrible, like Mrs. Plauscher. I—I—You." He looked at me, found my eyes. "Oh, you!" he said. "Where have you *been?*" ●

THE DOLL HOUSE

We live in a cardboard cottage,
Mom, Dad, the porcelain dog
and me.
The back of our house is missing
and sometimes
giant sticky hands invade
and move us from room to room
(for you see, we are paralyzed
and cannot move ourselves.)
Sometimes we sleep on the box-roof
looking up at the pale night ceiling
with one glass star
that burns out often.
Our neighbors called trolls
sport shocking day-glo hair.
They are nudists with morals
foreign to ours.
Sometimes the sticky hands
fly us far away
to a weedy outside world,
an early dirt grave.

—Wendy Rathbone

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Brian Stableford

The serenity of the countryside hides a terrifying and deadly secret in . . .

THE SCREAM

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Paul Scrivener moved his knight to imperil Jim Alvey's rook, and then sat back in his chair so that he could watch the frown of concentration deepen on the sheriff's face. For half an hour now he had been patiently building a king's side attack, drawing a ligature around the beleaguered black pieces and squeezing the potential out of them. Alvey had defended as stoutly and as patiently as he usually did, but he could see that the writing was on the wall unless he could identify some cunning ploy that might free his pieces and turn the tide.

They had been playing regularly for more than four years now; Scrivener won three games out of five, and was glad that it wasn't more. All the pleasure went out of the game when it was too one-sided. There wasn't that much pleasure left in life these days, and he was anxious to conserve all that he could.

While he studied Alvey's clouded expression, further confused by the yellow lamplight which shone down at an angle, Scrivener fanned his own face with a palm-leaf. It was a hot night, and the humidity always seemed worse in the evenings than it did in the blaze of noon. Every year the swamp-line crept closer; every year the river-floods were worse. When he had moved into the house nine years before it had seemed high enough on the hill to be safe for half a century, but now it no longer seemed such a secure haven. There was little or no chance of his being flooded out, but the spreading jungle-weed and the insects it brought with it weren't just a threat to the gardens and the vegetable-patches of the neighborhood; they were a threat to its whole way of life. Had the county not been devastated by the plague war, and its population reduced from thirty thousand to six-and-a-half, a mass migration would already have begun, but the war had changed the attitude of the survivors very dramatically. A social solidarity and a stubborn determination had been created which must have been far closer to the spirit of the pioneers of five centuries before than to the competitive individualism of their twentieth-century grandparents.

To the people who remained, the runaway Greenhouse Effect was just one more aspect of the ongoing crisis, one more weapon of the war between Dixie and the Devil, against which all possible material and spiritual resistance must be mounted.

Alvey looked up without having played, taking a rest from the effort of concentration.

"Hot as Hell tonight, Doc," he remarked, watching the rhythmic movement of Scrivener's makeshift fan.

"It's not so bad," said Scrivener, laconically. "It's just the sweat of the swamp makes it seem so. It'll get better. Competition and natural selection will make the weed grow taller, pushing the canopy higher and higher. Eventually, the foliage will make a screen under which the likes

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of you and I can walk in relative comfort. It's already happening downriver. That's the whole idea of induced tachytely—it's evolution while you wait. You and I won't see the climax community of the weedkin, but Roy and his kids will."

Roy was Alvey's son. In time, Roy would probably become sheriff, following in Jim's footsteps just as Jim had followed in Joe's. The Alveys had always had the kind of stubborn regard for tradition that the whole community had recently recovered. The Alveys were a much-respected family nowadays.

"They will if'n the skeeters don't get 'em," Alvey agreed. "Pity you guys couldn't just make the trees, without all the vermin come with 'em."

Alvey's "You guys" meant scientists in general, not even genetic engineers in particular. Alvey would have said the same if Scrivener had been a physicist or a geologist, and there was no point Scrivener pointing out that he had only ever worked with human beings. These days, in Romilly and a thousand small towns like it, all scientists were culpable, and all were expected to take responsibility for one another.

"We didn't make the weedkin," Scrivener said, mildly. "We just made it easier for the weedkin and the other green redeemers to remake themselves. We gave them increased plasticity and increased capacity to cope with mutation; they have to find their own ways to thrive in adverse circumstance—just as we do."

Scrivener's "we" meant "people," not just "you and me." Alvey understood that. He was an intelligent man, in spite of the hick act he sometimes put on for Scrivener's benefit.

The sheriff was just about to drop his gaze to the chessboard again when the scream split the night. The nodding head snapped upright and Alvey looked straight into Scrivener's eyes for one painful instant before he jerked to his feet and looked wildly out into the night, trying to figure out the exact direction from which the sound had come.

It was that kind of scream: the kind of sound which made a puppet of a man, jerking him around by his reflexes. The night was far too hot for the blood to run cold, but Scrivener felt a numbing terror clutch at his heart, as though it were trying to tear him in two. There was only one scream, then nothing. It lasted for maybe two seconds, and died abruptly, without fading to a sob or a sigh. It was a scream like a stroke of lightning, or a bullet in the back: an explosion of agony which expended all its energy in an instant.

Scrivener watched the sheriff reach for his holstered gun, then hesitate and twitch his fingers impotently. Beyond the lamplit verandah the night was black; there was nothing to be seen. The scream had sounded less than a quarter-mile away, but not so close as to be on Scrivener's property.

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"What the fuck was that?" whispered Alvey.

He's hoping it was an animal, Scrivener thought, surprised by his capacity for clinical analysis. *He knows that it wasn't, but he won't admit to himself that he knows. He doesn't want it to be human. He'd far rather think that nothing on earth could wring that sound from a human throat. That's what the other people will decide—that it was just some animal hollering, nothing to be scared of.*

Aloud, he said: "I don't know." It was a very easy lie to tell. It wouldn't have been any easier to say the words if they'd been true. Scrivener wished that he didn't know, wished that he dared doubt, but he didn't. He'd always known, deep down, that he'd hear the sound again. He'd always known that there was no hiding place, that retirement and flight to the deep south weren't enough to hide him from the consequences of his error. A weird temporal echo allowed him to hear himself speak the words that he'd said only a few moments before to Jim Alvey: "We didn't make the weedkin; we just made it easier for the weedkin and the other green redeemers to remake themselves." He hadn't made the cause of the scream, but he'd made it possible for the cause of the scream to remake herself.

"Whatever it was," said Alvey, "it's likely to be my business. Sorry, Doc—I can't finish the game. Leastways, not right now."

"That's okay, Jim," said Scrivener, wishing that he didn't sound quite so calm. "We'll call it a draw. We'll start over, some other night."

Alvey looked down at the table, at the paralyzed black pieces which he couldn't have freed, barring some miracle of inspiration, but he didn't protest.

"You could set it up on your machine," he said, picking up his hat and straightening his pants. "Play it out against the program. It'd be a real tough test for the silicon grandmaster." He didn't mean it. Neither he nor Scrivener ever played against computer programs; they both thought chess, like all games, ought to be a matter of man against man.

"Best of luck, Jim," said Scrivener, wishing that he dared mean it. "I hope it turns out to be nothing."

"Yeah," said the sheriff, as he jumped down from the verandah and strode away into the darkness, "Maybe it's nothing." He gave the strong impression that he wished he dared mean it too.

Scrivener checked the water meter, and figured that he could take a brief cold shower. Afterward, he dressed for bed. He thought that it was best to wear light pajamas in spite of the heat, to keep the flesh of his thighs from sweating too much when his legs rested together. He kept a single sheet on the bed, just in case something got inside the mosquito-netting. There was no way you could keep the insects entirely at bay,

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but you had to minimize the problem. The rapidly proliferating new insect species weren't carrying anything particularly nasty—induced tachytely hadn't yet succeeded in generating Son of Malaria—but their bites itched and there was always the possibility of an allergic reaction.

He tried to go to sleep, but he couldn't. The scream didn't echo in his mind—not, at any rate, as the ghost of a sound—but the possibilities awakened by the memory wouldn't lie quietly. He had found it increasingly difficult to sleep for eight hours a night, or even for five, since he had turned sixty. It didn't require much disturbance of his mental equilibrium to deliver him into the untender care of Morpheus' dark sister, Insomnia.

He tried to tell himself that he wasn't at fault. The fact that the road to Hell was paved with good intentions couldn't allow people to give up on their good intentions. In an era when desperation licensed such wild cards as the tachytelic weedkin, his project had seemed like something carefully planned, something wholly controllable, something cleverly virtuous. It hadn't seemed like a crazy gamble. But Scrivener had seen the shock in Jim Alvey's startled eyes when the scream had lanced through the sheriff's train of thought, and he knew what kind of horror would overcome those same oddly mild and gentle eyes if Alvey ever found out what had caused it. Not that Alvey ever would, of course. When—probably by dawn's early light—one of Alvey's men eventually found the body, there would be nothing at all to provide a causal link between the death and the scream. It would be a conundrum as unyielding as the problematic position which the sheriff had gratefully abandoned in order to go about his business.

Even so, it was impossible for Scrivener to convince himself that he wasn't responsible, that it wasn't *his fault.*

In the long run, he thought, *it'll all be okay. People will come through. The ecosphere will pull through. Because of us—the scientists. We provide the means by which society and wilderness alike may heal themselves. Without us, the world would be damned. In the long run, it'll all be okay, and the pain which the whole bloody world is screaming will go away. In the meantime, there's nothing much that can be added or taken away from the world's pain by one man's endeavors or one man's mistakes. It's just a drop in the . . .*

The phone rang. Without being quite aware of the fact, Scrivener had been waiting for it to ring. The scream hadn't just been a scream; it was a message, a threat, a promise.

He picked up the phone, and said "Hello," as non-committally as he could.

"Did you hear?" she said, rhetorically. She had made certain that he

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would hear. How long had she been out there in the darkness, lying in wait? "Did you understand?"

"Martha," he said, awkwardly. "Don't do this, Martha." It wasn't clear enough, he knew. He wasn't able to say precisely what he meant by "this," and that would allow her to misunderstand.

"It's in the nature of a scorpion to sting," she said. "There's no use in asking it to show civilized restraint of its own accord. You have to handle it right. You have to give it a reason to live and not to sting."

"You're not a scorpion, Martha. You're a human being. You're not a prisoner of some blind, unreasoning instinct. *You don't have to do this!*"

"You don't understand, Paul," she said, softly but quite distinctly. "You don't understand your own creation. You don't understand what an incredible thing you've done."

"Who was it?" he asked, not so sure that his voice would sound as distinct as hers. "Who was it, Martha?"

"A young one," she told him. He could hear the contrived relish in her voice—or *was* it contrived? "Succulent and tender. You've no idea how fresh they are when they're in that condition—like a breath of cool wind in your soul. It's hot down here, isn't it, Paul? Did you think you needed the heat to soothe your poor arthritic bones? Can't you stand the chill of winter any more?"

"The sheriff was here," he told her. "He's a good man. One incident won't mean anything, but if you don't move on he'll know that something's crazily wrong. He'll come after you, Martha. You don't know what it's like down here—how fiercely they resist the things that are done to them, day by day, by cruel circumstance."

"Did you tell him?" she jeered. "Did you tell him what the scream was? Did you tell him who I am?"

He couldn't reply immediately. He couldn't say no. She waited for him, probably knowing exactly how he was going to cop out.

"I will," he said. "I'll tell him everything. Tomorrow, I'll tell him everything."

"It's too late for that," she said. "You should have done that thirteen years ago, if you were ever going to. Instead, you chose to hide. You chose to hide me, and you chose to hide *from* me. Will you tell them now to shoot me down like a mad dog? Will you tell them now that I can't be taken into custody, can't be tried, can't be jailed? Will you tell them to crush me underfoot like some poisonous insect? You've had thirteen years to do that, *Doctor,* and you've held your tongue."

"I won't let you come *here,*" he said. "This is my home, and I won't have you violate it. This is where it stops, Martha. This is where I draw the line. I'm going to tell him, Martha. Go now, and don't ever come back this way again."

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"I don't believe you," she said. "If you're so concerned about this precious little community, pack your things. We'll go on together—any place you fancy. I'm tired of being alone, Paul. I need you. I want you. And if you don't want to come with me, I might just have to kill you. It's the nature of the beast, Dr. Scrivener—the nature of the beast which *you* made. I'm your creation, Paul; I'm the only thing you have to leave to posterity. You shouldn't have run from me. I never ran away. *I never ran away from what I am.*"

The moment she put the phone down he began to wish that he'd hung up on her. He'd let her run the whole conversation. He'd let her decide its beginning and its end. He'd displayed his impotence yet again, and in so doing had conceded that everything she said of him was true.

He knew that he ought to tell Jim Alvey everything. He knew that he'd always known that—that the *true* reason he'd courted the man's acquaintance and made a friend of him had nothing to do with love of a stupid game and everything to do with the knowledge that he would one day need a confessor. And yet, in all the years he'd known the sheriff, through all the long sweltering evenings when they'd sat outside, he'd never said a word about his reasons for coming way down south, or about the project he'd left behind. Time after time he'd hesitated over it, and left it all unsaid. Maybe he'd left it too long. He'd certainly left it long enough to let death into his adopted community, just as he'd let it into the community where he'd lived most of his working life.

He wished that he could just pick up the phone, and call Jim, or Roy, or the station-house, or anyone at all—but he couldn't. He was still a coward, still a runaway, still a man who couldn't draw the line and stick to it. He was impotent, in more ways than one.

He wouldn't believe me, he thought, and knew that it was true. Alvey wouldn't—couldn't—believe him right away. Alvey would check back, and make sure, and weigh things up and down and sideways. In the end, he would probably believe, but not until there'd been more deaths —maybe *many* more. By the time Alvey could be convinced, Hell would have broken loose and he, Paul Scrivener, would be well and truly in it, burning in the fires of universal hatred.

But there was only one alternative to picking up the phone, and that required a different kind of bravery, which he wasn't sure he had.

The next evening, as dusk was fading, Alvey mounted the steps to the verandah where Scrivener sat, dispirited to the point of exhaustion. The lamp was already lit, in anticipation of another long and sweaty evening.

"Long day?" Scrivener asked, when the ritual exchange of greetings was complete. He couldn't bring himself to ask outright about the body.

"Yeah," said Alvey, pausing before lowering himself into the chair

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that was permanently set out for him. "Look, Doc—I need some advice. You're the only person I can come to."

Alarm made Scrivener tense up inside, but he was sure that he wasn't showing any signs.

"Why me?" he asked.

"It's about what we heard last night," said Alvey, finally settling his lean frame into the chair. "Half a dozen other people down the hill say they heard it, but they were maybe twice as far away from it as we were. I talked to the Riddicks and Old Man Johnson, and they all said that it sounded like some animal hollerin'. I'm probably the only person in town that thinks somethin's not right—even the kid's ma closed up about it. She lost her husband and one of her daughters in the war; she's learned too well how to take it. There's no rage left in her, no sense of atrocity."

"Atrocity?" Scrivener repeated, uneasily.

"Sorry, Doc—not *that* kind of atrocity. Fact is, the boy didn't have a mark on him. No sign of violence whatsoever. The medical examiner went over him with a fine-toothed comb, and couldn't find a thing. Only thing he could put on the register was 'Heart Failure.' He told me it wasn't really a cause, just a statement. He didn't have any *explanation* at all. No suspicious circumstances, no evidence of any crime. It's like he just dropped dead—except that you and I, Doc, know that he didn't just *drop* dead. You and I heard him scream."

"What kind of advice do you want, Jim?" asked Scrivener, carefully.

Alvey paused for a moment before replying, and his gaze wandered over the jungle-weed that was spilling over Scrivener's fences, springing up all over the place. Then he looked back at his companion, and his sheriff's gaze was steady and penetrating.

"If I'd been on my own when I heard it," he said, "I guess I'd be doubting my memory by now. You can't really remember a *sound,* can you, Doc? Not if you only hear it once, for a short space. It's not as if a scream were music, is it? You have no clues to help you reconstruct it. But when I heard that scream, Doc, I looked up—and what I looked at was *you.* I saw you hear it, and I knew that what you heard was just as shocking to you as it was to me. I can't make the scream sound again in my head, but I can picture your face, and I know that what we heard was something real, something awful. I read it in your eyes, and that's what keeps me from doubting myself. So I know that you'll understand me when I say that only you and I know that there's something here that has to be figured out. I know that you'll understand me when I say that you're the one person I can trust to take my question seriously. The M.E. couldn't, you see. He just shrugged it off."

"What question?" Scrivener asked, forcing the words out of a mouth that had suddenly gone dry.

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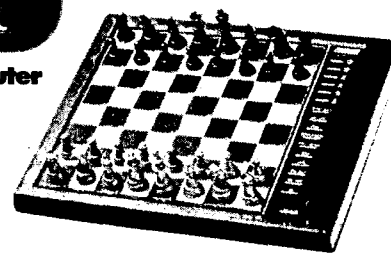

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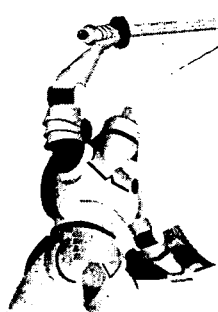

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"The question that's nagging me. You see, I *know* that what you and I heard last night was a cry of pain—the cry of a man in absolute agony. And yet, the body my men found this morning hasn't a mark on it. Hell, there isn't even a bruise from where the poor kid fell over. It's like he was just *switched off.* So what I want to know, Doc—and what I'd like to ask your advice about—is this: what kind of pain can a boy have, to make him scream like that and kill him stone dead, *without leaving any sign at all on his body?* I know you don't *know,* Doc, so don't bother to tell me that—but I also know that you're a scientist who's worked in human biology, and a pretty smart guy all around. Give me some ideas, Doc—some possibilities."

The sheriff's eyes were frank and friendly; he really was asking for help from the one man who might understand him. He didn't suspect a thing. Scrivener was ashamed to find the anxiety easing out of him. There was no proof of crime, no shadow of suspicion to darken his doorstep; Jim Alvey just wanted to talk, to express his unease. In that, he was exceptional. Ninety-five million people had died within the borders of the USA during these last thirty years, and that was in a nation that had escaped relatively lightly. The boy's mother was the one who had the right attitude; people surrounded for such a long period by so much death couldn't afford to let grief prick them into demanding explanations and excuses. Death simply *was*; it was everywhere. Martha left no trail of horror where she went, nor any pattern that would show up on a police computer. All the death certificates said "Heart Failure." What else *could* they say?

"Take your time, Doc," Alvey added, calling Scrivener's attention to the fact that he had made no attempt to reply. The scientist looked into the sheriff's eyes, and saw nothing there but patience. Alvey thought that he was thinking about it, and wasn't trying to rush him.

I could tell him now, Scrivener thought. *I could offer him the whole thing on a plate, couched as a hypothesis. Without accusing myself, without even implicating myself. I could lay it out for him. But what good would it do? The only way I can give him enough to justify shooting her down on sight would be to tell him everything, and even then . . . he's too decent a man. If he goes after her, she'll surely kill him. I can handle it myself. I can make her go away. That's all that's needed, and all that can be done without more lives being lost. I just have to make her go away.*

"Maybe the boy suffered some kind of fit," he said, although the hypocrisy tasted like ashes in his mouth. "Maybe the internal spasm which stopped his heart caused him great pain—something like angina but worse. Even after your heart stops, you still have oxygen in your brain for a little while—enough to let you feel, maybe enough to let you scream."

"People with heart attacks gasp," said Alvey. "They don't scream. They

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get short of breath, as if their lungs won't pump—in my experience, that is. Do you know different?"

"Not all attacks are alike," said Scrivener, weakly. "Maybe not the heart—maybe the brain. I know he didn't have a stroke, or the M.E. would have found a clot or evidence of the hemorrhage, but maybe something more like an epileptic fit—an electrical event, that left his motor nerves free to operate long enough to produce the scream." Silently, though, he said: *You already know the answers, Jim. You spoke the words yourself. Absolute agony. Pure pain and nothing else. No further cause in the poor kid's body.*

"Could it be somethin' we haven't seen before?" asked Alvey, not pushily, but as if he were groping for support. "Somethin' the M.E. didn't know to look for. Could it be somethin' left over from the last war—or the first shot in the next? Could it be somethin' cooked up in a lab, Doc? I know you've been out of the work for a while, but you'd know if somethin' like that were possible, wouldn't you?"

"Everything's possible, Jim," said Scrivener, softly. "Anything and everything that could kill or maim a man can come out of today's labs. Maybe the plague war isn't over. But if that's what it is, what can you or I do about it?"

Alvey didn't answer that for a moment or two. Then he stood up, replaced his hat, brushed his pants, and said: "I just wanted you to think about it, Doc. I still do. I want you to turn it over in your mind, and see if anything strikes you. I really would appreciate your advice, if you can think of any to offer. I don't know what we can do, but I wouldn't feel right if I just let this thing pass without tryin' to figure it out, even if it ain't really my business because there ain't really any crime. I'm not that kind of guy."

"I know," said Scrivener, softly, wishing that he weren't that kind of guy himself. He watched the sheriff walk away, and then he settled back in his own chair, waiting for the phone to ring.

The phone never did ring, and the sleepless night finally caught up with Scrivener. He nodded off in the chair, and when he finally caught himself up with a start and opened his eyes she was there, sitting in the sheriff's chair. He knew that she had taken up that position so that the table could be between them. She still had some talking to do.

"You didn't tell him, did you?" she said.

"No," he admitted.

"I knew you wouldn't. He'd never understand, would he? The best you could hope for is that he'd act without understanding—and that's not what you want, deep down. You don't want them to shoot me down. Not because you love me—you're not man enough for that. Not even because

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you made me, because I'm your one and only Eve. It's just that you'd have to face them, then. You'd have to stand before them, and face the force of their uncomprehending hatred, the malice born of their stupid incapacity to understand. You can't stand the idea that they'd think of you as a fool, one more of the reckless madmen who brought the human race to the edge of annihilation."

"What do you *want*, Martha?" he demanded. "Why did you come here? Not, surely, because *you* love *me?* You surely gave that up a long time ago."

"You underestimate the durability of female love," she said, mockingly. "It's only natural that those who allow doctors to exercise godlike powers over them should fall in love with their recreators, isn't it? The sexual success of cosmetic engineers is legendary. And what you tried to do, you tried to do for the sake of love, didn't you? For the enhancement of human understanding? You wanted to move beyond good and evil —and you succeeded."

She was deliberately twisting words he had used. She knew exactly what he had meant when he had spoken of moving beyond good and evil. That had always been his aim. In the past, men had decided what was evil—hunger, thirst, pain, fear, sickness, misery—and had formed their notion of good negatively, as the relief or repair of evils. Almost all of the non-military applications of biotechnology had been directed toward that kind of good: the relief of hunger; the healing of disease; the alleviation of peril. He had wanted to go beyond that kind of corrective philosophy, in search of some notion of positive, creative good. His ambition had been to improve the quality of human life, to transcend the legacy of the natural, to add to human powers of communication, understanding and love. Everything she said was true, even though she was mocking him. Her very existence—and the killing habit which she claimed as her "nature"—was the greatest mockery of all.

"What do you want, Martha?" he said, again.

"I want you to be with me," she said, simply. "I'm lonely. You have no idea how lonely I am. I need you, Paul. That's all there is to it."

He looked into her eyes, as he had earlier looked into Alvey's. The lamp above the table cast its light at the familiar angle, throwing unkind shadows across her lined face. She was still handsome, after a fashion, but age had made its indelible mark. Why couldn't fate have decided that she be counted among the casualties of the long war? Why had *she* survived, when so many innocents had perished? Why had *he?*

"How many people have you killed, Martha?" he asked.

"I didn't keep count," she said, flatly.

"You don't have to do it. You're a human being—a *moral* being. You have a *choice.*"

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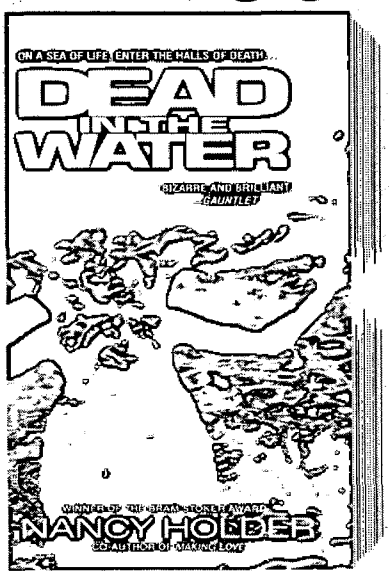
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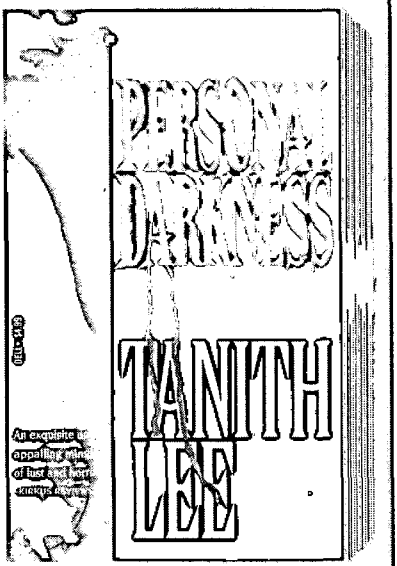

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"What the fuck do *you* know about it?" she demanded. "You *don't* know. You *can't* know. Do you think a junkie has any *real* choice about grabbing his next fix? Do you think a torture-victim has any *real* choice about answering questions? And that's just crude conditioning—answer or else. That's just pain as blunt instrument. What happens inside me is right inside the fucking brain, Paul. It's the addiction circuit *itself* that's activated by direct stimulation. Even those rats with electrodes pouring shocks into their pleasure centers were just beating themselves over the head with rough-hewn bricks compared to the precision and purity of what you gave *me.* You have no idea what good *really means,* Dr. Scrivener, for all your talk about accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative. You have no idea what *pleasure* is: pure, unadulterated, perfect pleasure. Sure I have a choice, Dr. Scrivener. It's the fact that I have a choice which makes me choose *pleasure,* because I'm the only fucking human being on the surface of the planet who *can* choose pleasure. Nobody who had the choice could ever choose anything different, because that's what choice *is*: the chance to go for the best, the chance to grab what's really worth having."

"And even then," he said, when it was clear that she had finished, "it's not enough. Even though you have what you have, you want something more."

"Yes," she answered, flatly. "I want more. I want . . . sympathy. I want love. Ordinary, everyday companionship. Even though I have the other thing, I still have to live in the world. I'm not a monster, Paul—I'm a human being. As you keep reminding me, I'm a human being."

"Why me?" he asked, hollowly. It was a stupid question.

"Because you're the only one who understands," she said, her voice half-way between innocence and bleakness. "You're the only one who understands *who I am.* Nobody else ever has, or ever could. When I tried to explain, even to the special ones . . . I had to kill them, Paul. I *had* to."

"And if I won't be understanding," he said, "you've decided to kill me too, haven't you?"

"I wouldn't really do that," she told him, although the lie was quite transparent. "I'd never harm you. But you have to come with me. You have to. *I can't go on without you.*"

And I can't go on at all, he thought, miserably. *I don't know why I ever thought I could. Even if you'd disappeared, the way I wanted you to. Even if you'd died, the way you ought to have done. How could I just . . . go on?*

He reached across the table with both arms, palms forward and fingers splayed.

"All right, Martha," he said, quietly. "Let's see how much choice you have."

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She rose to the challenge nobly. She folded her fingers around his, and their palms touched, face to face. They looked into one another's lamplit eyes, and she really wasn't going to make a move. She really was opening out to him, offering her heart. She really was as lonely as that.

Her scream echoed in his ears for a little longer than the couple of seconds it lasted, but it died away. As Jim Alvey had observed, it wasn't easy to remember sounds of that outlandish character. The human mind simply wasn't equipped for imaging such things—but the sight of her astonished eyes lingered much, much longer. The visual imagination is so much more apt than the auditory, so much more responsive to facial expression.

He tried to figure out what he felt, but it wasn't easy. It was all so unexpected. For the moment, it was pure sensation, which might be negotiated into joy, or exultation, or horror—maybe even terror.

He could still see her face when he finally realized that he was not alone, and that Sheriff Alvey had already drawn his gun.

"Where were you?" Scrivener asked.

"Right out there in the jungle-weed," said Alvey. "I saw the woman headed up this way and followed her."

"You had a hunch," said Scrivener, wondering why he was being sarcastic.

"I had a little more than a hunch," said Alvey. "But not enough. I wish I'd had more. I wish she'd stayed away, until you'd thought it over. Tomorrow, you'd have told me everything I wanted to know, wouldn't you?"

"There isn't a mark on her," Scrivener pointed out. "Even though you saw us, even though you heard her scream, you have no evidence that any crime has been committed. All that happened was that we held hands for a few moments, and then she dropped dead. Even if everyone were to accept that she screamed in pain, that wouldn't prove a thing. As I suggested to you earlier, the only explanation anybody could accept is that she had some kind of electrical storm in her brain—some kind of fit. There's nothing suspicious about my being on the scene, given that I have the perfect alibi for the moment of the other death. Anyway, what do you have that's more than a hunch?"

"I looked at you right after we heard the other scream," said the sheriff. "What I saw in your face then . . . it wasn't just shock. It was *recognition*. You weren't puzzled, Doc. The moment you heard that sound, even though it was like nothing on earth, you *knew* what it was. You'd heard it before."

"That's not evidence," said Scrivener, dismissively. "If you took that into any court of law in the land you'd be laughed right out of it."

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"I know that," said Alvey, whose own expression still looked strangely amiable. His big dark eyes seemed as frank and guileless as they always had. "That's why I figured I had to take it slowly, step by step. I kinda figured on worming it out of you by stealthy persuasion. I think you'd have been ready to trust me with the story, given time. Pity the lady was in such a hurry. She did kill the boy, I suppose?"

Scrivener nodded mechanically. Alvey still had his gun in his hand, and he was still standing up—not that there was anywhere for him to sit down, given that there was a body in his chair.

"Did you hear what we were saying?" asked the doctor.

"Most of it," said Alvey, "but I have to say that I couldn't make much sense out of what I heard. I already knew she'd done it a lot more times, even though none of it showed up on the police computer."

"What did you check out? Medical records?"

Alvey shook his head. "Too much ordinary heart failure to show up the pattern. I had to check with the State University. Did you know that the Archivist there has programs which sort and store data from every newspaper in the world? Helluva thing—awesome amounts of information, and all cross-correlated, if you only know what to ask. Nobody had ever asked before, but it was in there right enough. Screams in the night usually get reported somewhere around the bottom of page five even in local papers, and they only get promoted to page two if someone links them to a mysterious death, just so long as there's no evidence of a crime—but they do get reported. Enough, anyhow. I was able to confirm that our little incident was by no means the only one—and that the first ones on record happened up in Canada, in Toronto. You worked up in Toronto, didn't you, Doc? You were there when the whole thing started, weren't you?"

"You knew this when you came to see me this evening?" asked Scrivener.

Alvey nodded.

"Stealthy persuasion," the doctor quoted. "You surely have a flair for the key phrase, Jim. Stealthy persuasion. Absolute agony."

"I'm not sure we have time for stealthy persuasion any longer," said the Sheriff. "I'm asking you right out, Doc—what the fuck is going on here? I know I just saw you commit a murder, but I still can't figure out how or why."

"Aren't you supposed to read me my rights, so that whatever I say can be used against me? Don't you get into procedural difficulties when you come to court if you don't do that?"

"I'm askin' you as one friend to another, Doc. I just want to know what's happenin' here. Just now, I'm not thinking about makin' a case."

For thirteen years, Scrivener had found himself unable to speak. Now,

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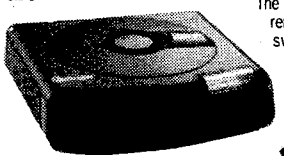

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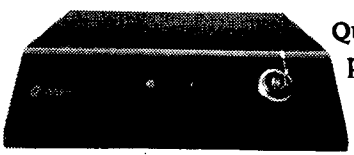

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Quorum Securing Life

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with Martha lying there, stone dead, he found at last that it was impossible to remain silent.

"It was an experiment," he said. "Have you ever wondered what it might be like really to get in contact with someone else? To be able to share your feelings, maybe even your thoughts?"

"I guess," said Alvey. "You mean telepathy—something like that?"

"Telepathy's just a plausible impossibility," said Scrivener. "Because we 'hear' our own thoughts, as if they were words spoken in the private spaces of our mind, it seems plausible that someone else might be able to listen in—but it isn't like that really. Without an actual connection of some kind—a physical connection—there's no way that the information can get across. Even radio waves need a transmitter and a receiver adapted to their task. But we have technologies now which seemed to me to offer the chance of making such a connection. We have ways of persuading damaged nerve-tissue to regenerate, and it only requires a change of perspective to turn those techniques to the further purpose of making our nervous systems more elaborate. I operated on Martha's left hand, restructuring the superficial tissues so that her nerve-cells could extend filaments through the epidermis—and then through the epidermis of any hand that was touching hers, to link up with the nerves in the other hand. I gave her the ability to form an actual multi-synaptic interface between her nervous system and that of another person.

"I didn't expect miracles to follow the formation of such a bridge, of course. But once it was in place, I thought there was a chance that the two people so linked might be able to train themselves up, to find some way of exchanging information. I thought that there must be a possibility of making the bridge functional, of actually transferring experience of *some* kind directly from one system to the other. I assumed that in the beginning it would be very primitive sensations, but that in the fullness of time Martha and the passive volunteers might cultivate new facilities and new aptitudes. I asked them to try hard for any possible effect, just to make sure the cross-stimulation was possible.

"Maybe I should have stopped when the early results were all to do with pain, but I didn't. I thought—hoped, at least—that the pain was just teething troubles, that we'd get past it. Instead . . . well, maybe the trick that Martha learned wasn't the *only* one that was there to be learned. Maybe it was just a fluke of ill-fortune. On the other hand, maybe there's a very good reason why natural selection didn't give us nerves which could extend themselves to that kind of communication. All that Martha learned was how to increase the pain sensations, and restrict them to the passive partner—and while she learned it, she was also hooking her new skills up to certain circuits in her hind brain—the

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circuits which generate the physical rewards that we construe as pleasure. By the time I cut off the experiments in the lab it was already too late—she was conducting experiments of her own. When she called me to report her 'results,' I knew how badly it had all gone wrong.

"I was scared, and bitterly disappointed. I should have stayed, revealed my hideous failure to the world, faced the music . . . but I didn't. I quit. I retired. I came down here. Martha had already disappeared . . . having discovered that the greatest pleasure of all, the purest pleasure that life has to offer—*her* life, at any rate—is that to be obtained by linking up one nervous system to another, and flooding the passive system with pure pain.

" 'Absolute agony' is absolutely right, Jim. That's what does it. What it must feel like to the victim you can't possibly imagine. All the pain *you*'ve ever felt is a localized response to injury. What Martha could do went way beyond that. Way beyond. They died of it—shock, followed by brain death. The heart failure is secondary, I think—an effect rather than a cause. The only symptom is the scream. For Martha, that selfsame shock of connection was pure pleasure. Again, you can't really imagine that, Jim, because all the pleasure *you*'ve ever felt is moderated, muffled, half-hearted, no matter how intense it seemed. Martha was the ultimate sadist, Jim. Her infinite pleasure was the infinite pain of her victims. Maybe it *could* have been different . . . maybe someone else, using exactly the same physiological apparatus, could have become something infinitely better. But how could we possibly dare to try, knowing that the risk was there of creating another Martha . . . perhaps hundreds of Marthas? How could we ever dare to make connections, knowing what they might lead to?"

"How did she come to be the volunteer, Dr. Scrivener?" asked Alvey, quietly. "How did you choose her?"

"She was my wife," said Scrivener. "She'd been my lab assistant for years, but by the time I performed the operation, she was my wife."

"Who operated on *you,* Doc?" he asked. "Who gave *you* the power?"

Scrivener was mildly surprised by that one. "When I say 'operation,' " he said, "I'm not talking about scalpels. It was all quite bloodless—and painless. I didn't need anybody else. I did the operation myself, after Martha walked out but before I found out what extremes she'd gone to on her own behalf. I had to stop my own investigations after that, you see. Because of everything I said just now. How could I carry on, knowing what a risk there was? I daren't use what I'd given myself, in case I became *like her.*"

"But you were strong enough to *kill* her," Alvey pointed out. "When it came to a contest, *you* won."

"That wasn't a contest," Scrivener told him. "I took her by surprise.

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She wasn't expecting it. She only wanted to hold my hand. I wasn't even sure that I could do it—I only knew I had to try."

Alvey's gaze flicked back to the dead woman. Scrivener followed the direction of the sheriff's stare. Martha looked so very peaceful, not at all the way someone who had died of absolute agony *ought* to look.

"What now, Jim?" said Scrivener. "Are you going to shoot me down like a rabid dog? Maybe you want me to write it all down first, so you can show it to the tribunal when you have to explain it."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," said the sheriff. "All I want is that you should tell your story. It isn't up to me whether you're charged with murder, or anything else. I just want the facts on record so that the proper authorities can make up their minds."

"That's very big of you, Jim," said Scrivener. "But I'll bet you're not willing to put that gun back in its holster and shake me by the hand. Now that you know I'm a monster, you'll never trust me again—nor will anyone else. From now on, I've lost my place—not just in Romilly but in the whole human world."

"No, Doc," said Alvey, calmly. "It ain't like that. I spent a lot of time sitting here with you, talkin' an' playin' chess an' all. The folk down the hill still call you an outsider, but you're the best friend I got. I pride myself on bein' a good judge of character, an' I still believe you'd have told me everythin', given a little stealthy coaxin'. I'll put my gun away now, an' we can walk down the hill together, just like we have a dozen times before."

"Thanks, Jim," said the doctor, sincerely. "You're right, of course. I'm still a human being. I can make my own choices."

A full twenty minutes had passed before the sheriff's scream rent the air. He was a big man, and he had big lungs. He could be heard half way across the county, but even the people who were pretty close eventually persuaded themselves that it was just some kind of animal hollering. These days, they told themselves—what with the damn scientists throwing evolution into a higher gear in the desperate attempt to stop the world going to hell in a handbasket—you never could tell what would turn up next. When they found Jim Alvey's body the next morning, they naturally fell to wondering all over again, but when they'd talked it out among themselves, there was nothing much to be done.

After all, the guy hadn't a mark on him—and even though he was the sheriff, he hadn't had an enemy in the world. ●

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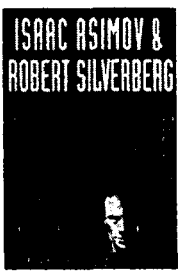

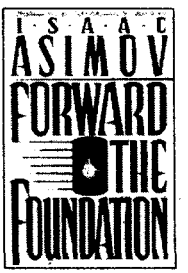

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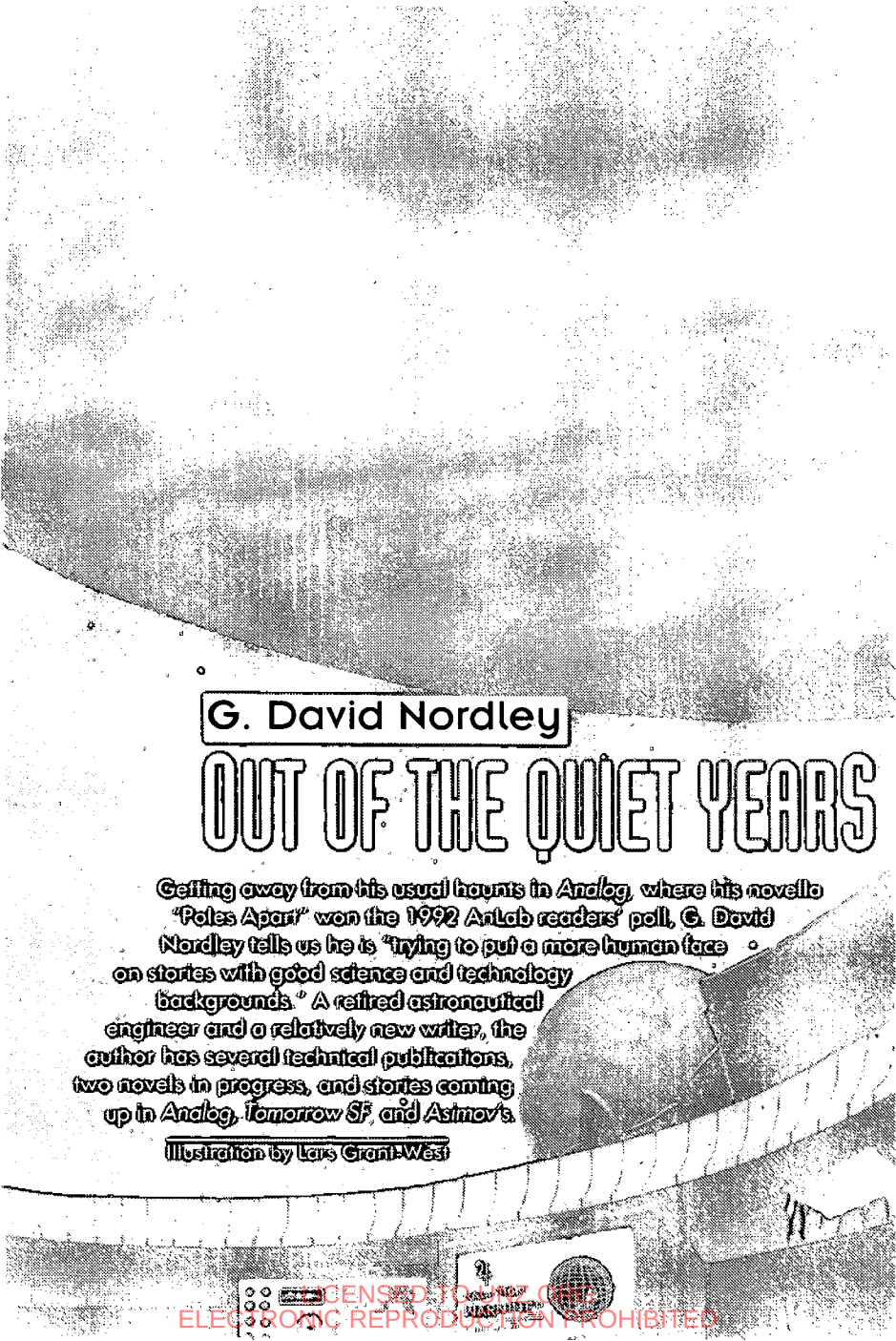

G. David Nordley

OUT OF THE QUIET YEARS

Getting away from his usual haunts in *Analog*, where his novella "Poles Apart" won the 1992 AnLab readers' poll, G. David Nordley tells us he is "trying to put a more human face on stories with good science and technology backgrounds." A retired astronautical engineer and a relatively new writer, the author has several technical publications, two novels in progress, and stories coming up in *Analog*, *Tomorrow SF*, and *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Lars Grant-West

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0.4 milligauss.

I watched the surface magnetometer telemetry average with growing anxiety. It was up to ten times the average of the last five years, or the last five days for that matter, and it was growing too fast. But there was no backing out for me now. I could hear Captain Sin in the background.

". . . so the party's over, Amalthea, Jupiter's magnetic field is coming back for real this time, we've got to pull you out of there, *now*, and we're coming to do it. Our ETA over Mount Barnard is three two seven point twenty-three hundred. End."

Lu Sin pirouetted away from the comm panel to face me and floated in front of our spacecraft's bubble nose, a spare, severe woman whose light complexion and short straight silver hair made a stark contrast with the great orange-yellow globe behind her. She had a reputation for never making mistakes, and for being a very private person. She was senior.

The comm panel finally came to life: Callisto orbit to Amalthea and back is about a dozen seconds, if you're a photon. A stout, iron-haired, crew-cut, thick-mustached man appeared in the screen. I did a double take. Was it him?

"Open. No problem with evacuation here, *Billybrown*. We're seeing the highest field readings in five years, and protons to match. Some of us still have ideas about becoming parents. Just make sure you have brakes on that bus! End."

I stared at the blank screen. It *could* be him, but I wasn't sure. The man I remembered had a full black beard and was still athletically thin. I'd never seen my father's chin. This man was a robust walrus type—but. . . .

"We are locked onto the power beam," the ship reported. When the gauss first started climbing eight hours ago, the bureaucrats wanted to talk it over, but we'd pretty much insisted on going, and the Callisto Equilateral port manager, Chunny Kim, was sticking his neck out for us. Technically, it wasn't up to him to allocate the resources we represented, but this situation wouldn't wait; the event had caught Amalthea without deep space transport. The lock-on meant that no one at Callisto Equilateral had pulled the plug on us.

I returned Lu Sin's stare. "We're just waiting for traffic to clear the power beam. Are you still sure you want to do this?"

"Lives are at stake, Rik."

And careers. "We'll look pretty silly if the field fades again."

"That is unlikely. The rise has been steady all over the planet, not the flickering thing you get from a loose plasmoid off the solar wind. No, Jupiter means it this time. We're already starting to see trapped particles. Are we ready?"

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Not knowing why Jupiter's magnetic field turned *off* hadn't put science in a very good position to predict when and how fast it would come back *on* again. Like volcanoes, magnetic fields are a result of the "weather" of a planet's heart; chaotic, sensitive, unpredictable. Geologists can show you where even Earth's field has faded off and come back in the reverse direction more than once. The quiet years for Jupiter might have been decades, centuries, or millennia. They turned out to be seven years, three months, and twenty-two days. The end, of course, had caught everyone by surprise.

I just nodded. I had a personal reason for going on the rescue mission, but Lu Sin had no close friends anywhere, as far as anyone knew. This wasn't going to be cut-and-dried, so we had a crew of two for redundancy. I supposed this was just part of her concept of duty. Altruism, duty.

This was a new phase in my life: I suppose at thirty-six, I was finally growing up.

Lu Sin nodded at me. She was ready to go.

"Start thrust," I told the ship. The acceleration alarm tone sounded, and I started falling to the cabin floor before I could push myself there. Three percent gravity, I reflected, was probably some kind of record for a loaded cluster ion rocket. I looked at the mass flow and the delta V remaining. Fifty-four kilometers per second at max exhaust velocity. In theory, enough for the mission, but we'd cut every margin to the bone. I looked around at the mess of exposed cables and tubes. Every last piece of unnecessary mass was gone. The only reason *we* were here was that people still weighed a lot less than their equivalent in creative, problem-solving robots.

If anything major went wrong, we probably wouldn't survive. But if we didn't do this as fast as possible, the thirty people at *Amalthea* base probably wouldn't survive.

"Let's have the external view." Lu Sin directed, and we picked up the feed from a station telescope. The *Billybrown* resembles the planet Saturn, with much wider, gapless rings, say out to Titan. Looking at the rectenna almost edge-on, I could see it dimple at the gimbaled thruster nodes. A thousand invisible megawatts of beamed microwave power washed over us at a couple of kilowatts per square meter, was rectified into direct current by our kilometer-wide superconducting rectenna, and sent back out as equally invisible beams of ammonia cluster ions. If it were dark, they would have glowed a little bit as the neutralizing electrons caught up with them. Lu Sin looked at the picture and nodded judiciously. So far, so good.

"Play the last incoming back for me, visual only, quarter speed," I said.

Yes, it was my father. I could even see some of myself there, in the

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way his brow wrinkled, in the spacing of the eyes, though they were less Asian than my own.

"I wonder if he recognized me, or even knows I'm in the system?"

Lu Sin gave me a sympathetic smile. "There's plenty of time, Richard. You don't need to make it hard on yourself."

"The last time I saw him, I was camping in the Puna, trying to make up my mind if I was going to major in sociology or marijuana. I was seventeen. I guess I don't blame him."

1.2 milligauss.

A thousand autonomous probes floated in Jupiter's clouds, and from Metis to Himalia, on Io and in the oceans of Europa, across a hundred scientific outposts in the Jovian system, people were watching the magnetometer telemetry average, some with excitement, some with dread, many with both. It went up to 1.3 milligauss as I stared at it. I looked over at the less abstract radiation dose board. Electron dose up to a tenth rad, but the hull stopped most of this.

If the radiation stayed at this level, I'd get out of Jupiter's revenant Van Allen belts without exceeding my monthly dose limit. But no one expected it would stay there. It had reached this level from essentially zero in less than a dozen hours. Over the vast reaches of Jovian space, even a small field could whip ions up to deadly energies.

"The radiation ought to lag the field by a little," Lu Sin remarked. "It's the heavy ions sputtering off the inner moons that knock the electrons and protons up to the really lethal levels, and that population is way down."

"Does it matter? We're committed now."

She just nodded. Yes, it mattered. Yes, we were committed.

Everyone inside Callisto's orbit knew the risks; we were like the people who walk around on the rims of live volcanoes with seismometers and comm gear, waiting to get blown off. You know it's going to go sometime, but somehow the quest for scientific knowledge justifies playing chicken with God.

I watched our perijovian radius shrink to seventy thousand kilometers; well inside Jupiter's atmosphere. If we had just canceled Callisto's orbital velocity and done nothing else, we would burn-in in a little less than a week. But that wasn't good enough for us on this mission. Oh, no. I was standing on the acceleration "floor" looking at Jupiter through the cabin skylight now. We were in a power dive right at it, to get there in a third of the usual time.

For routine operation, the ship pretty much ran itself. I let my mind wander to this and that as I watched Jupiter, the magnetic field, and the

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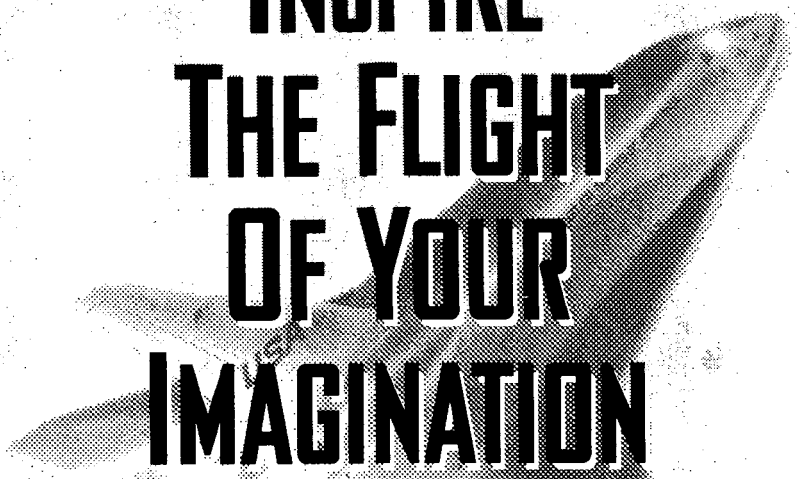

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radiation dose readings grow. There would be nothing much to do for two days, then, everything.

"Prepare for zero gravity, one hundred seconds," the *Billybrown* announced.

We rushed to stow all the loose objects that had accumulated in the last six hours. Acceleration ramped down, and soon we were floating.

"I'll sleep now," Lu Sin announced. "See you in twelve hours."

I nodded an acknowledgment, and she reached for a stanchion and pushed herself over to one of the thirty-two hammocks tied to the bare girders around our hollow ball. She pulled herself in, vanishing into a vacuum-proof cocoon, leaving me alone with the ship and my thoughts.

7 milligauss.

We reached Ganymede orbit in record time, but not soon enough for me. The radiation dose data was starting to make me thankful that I hadn't been too shy to make a sperm donation. I'd dated a nurse from Callisto Equilateral clinic for a few months after my arrival, who talked me into it. Fond memories; everyone should get serious with a nurse or a doctor at least once in their life. Certain inhibitions will not survive the encounter. But sad memories as well; be prepared for her to find someone else that needs more nurturing than you do. I smiled at my reflection in a blank control panel display. I had the *Billybrown* recompute the minimum time for our mission. Forty hours down, a day there, seventy-two hours back, on profligate non-Hohman trajectories. Landing in a hospital might be about the best that could happen. The radiation could get bad.

Before the quiet years, Jupiter's magnetic moment was about four thousand times as strong as Earth's, and its insubstantial but deadly magnetosphere was the largest thing in the solar system. At the cloud tops where our monitors floated, over ten times as far from Jupiter's center as Earth's surface is from its center, the field was still ten times as strong; almost four thousand milligauss. Drop a piece of iron in a field like that, and you have an instant bar magnet.

This tilted, off-center field had whipped around Jovian space every ten hours, trapping charged particles and stampeding them before it, nearly up to cosmic ray energies. The volcanoes of Io and the radiation-blasted surfaces of the other satellites supplied plenty of charged particles.

One would have just as soon gone walking around inside a nuclear reactor as visit Jupiter's inner moons back then. The first probes through that magnetospere had absorbed half a million rads in a few hours from electrons alone. Less than five hundred rads can kill.

Then, in 2115, over less than eight weeks, the largest object in the solar system, Jupiter's magnetosphere, had simply ceased to exist. The

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belts faded too, and you needed a polarized filter to see where the erstwhile Red Spot was. Why? No one knew. Everyone wanted to know.

Suddenly, there was the scientific equivalent of a gold rush. The reason was that the Jovian moon system is an analog of the solar system: tiny Amalthea, Io, and Europa are its inner planets, ice rich Ganymede and Callisto correspond to its giants, Himalia and debris play the role of Pluto and the Oort belt. Ten thousand field planetologists wanted to come and see for themselves, and within a couple of years, three thousand did, families and all.

As well as a few hundred support personnel to manage all the robotic equipment, including the spacecraft. I had been a pilot in need of a job, and I had something to prove. So when Callisto Equilateral opened up, I came.

Outside the worst of the radiation belts, Callisto Equilateral had been the convenient staging ground of robotic expeditions for several decades. The dynamically stable location trailing the Mercury-sized moon was a sort of cosmic Sargasso sea where the gentle nudge of gravity and tidal forces had collected a few small pieces and other debris over millennia, providing ready building material and volatiles. As the only technology base in the system, it became the San Francisco of the Jupiter rush.

I asked the ship for the telemetry display again. The surface field average was up to eight milligauss, the dose rate at Amalthea orbit was getting near a hundredth of a rad per day. Time to wake up Lu Sin.

12 milligauss.

Lu Sin and I must have talked for an hour before she turned in at the start of my second shift. She felt that it was really time to let Father know that I was part of his rescue party, but I wanted to keep putting the moment off. So I gave the problem to Jupiter: the bland, faintly striped yellowish beachball above me proved to be an excellent meditation object.

It beat looking at the dose display and reminding myself that my odds of getting leukemia were coming up out of the noise. I wondered how Lu Sin passed the time on her shift.

I must have floated under the skylight for an hour before I suspected something was wrong. My internal clock was telling me something was supposed to be happening.

Deceleration was supposed to start on this shift.

"When do we start deceleration prep?" I asked the ship.

"Deceleration is on hold." I really didn't need to hear that.

"For how long? Why weren't we told?"

"The hold is minute to minute. There is still some margin and Callisto

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Equilateral didn't want to worry you unnecessarily. They used an override code to countermand my standing program."

"The hell you say! Lu Sin," I shouted to be heard through the insulation of her hammock, "we've got problems." Her hammock started writhing.

"What's wrong?" emerged in a muffled voice.

"No power for deceleration, and no explanation." I turned to the comm panel. "Callisto Equilateral, this is *Billybrown*. Request immediate data dump on deceleration schedule change."

We were already so close to Jupiter that immediate would mean about four seconds. I floated tight-limbed and ran my hand over what was left of my hair, fuming. Lu Sin joined me in her vacuum suit, coveralls in hand. A vacuum-safe undersuit looks like it's painted on, and part of me noted that she looked a lot younger than I thought. She gave no sign of noticing my noticing, but despite her quiet, proper, and almost aloof demeanor, there was no hint of embarrassment either.

Callisto Equilateral's message was terse and ominous: "Power failure this end. No ETRO."

No estimated time to return operational. A look at the astrodynamics display told me that if we didn't start thrusting in an hour, there was no possible Amalthea rendezvous. If we didn't start thrusting in about two hours, there was no way to avoid hitting Jupiter.

Lu Sin finished dressing without comment as soon as it was apparent that she wouldn't have to do anything else immediately. Then she touched my hand.

"We should tell Amalthea." Her eyes said tell *everything*. "I'm senior. I'll break it to them."

Amalthea was coming out of eclipse on Jupiter's western limb. Its angular velocity wasn't much different than ours because most of our velocity was in the downward direction. It would stay in view for hours. The delay was down to about a second and a half. We could converse.

". . . and that is all we know at this point. Dr. Kolentz, my first has a personal message. For you." She was putting me on the spot. Actually, I was relieved; I'd put it off too long.

We looked at each other. "It's me, Dad."

"So. . . . . Rik, this is a surprise. . . . You've come up in the world. I suspected the first time it was you, but I've known so many people, and after eighteen years, maybe my imagination was playing wishful thinking tricks on me." He laughed. "Even your companion reminds me of someone. . . . Well. Does Marienne know?"

That I hadn't expected. Mom left us to be an actress when I was ten, sending a card every other year or so. The last one was when I was eighteen. She'd been on her fourth husband, then.

"Dad, it's been eighteen years. She'd be in her sixties. . . . "

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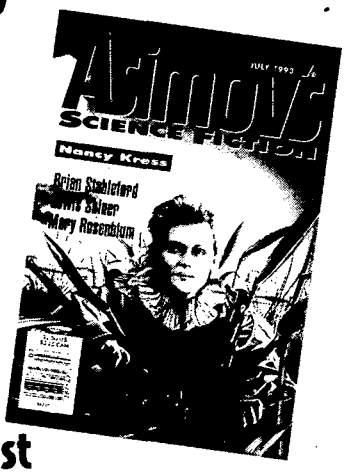

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"Sixty-six, but who's counting. I was just hoping. I'm too old for grudges now, and she had her reasons. Time to pick up what pieces I can, if you understand. . . . So. . . how did you become a spaceship pilot?"

"I started sky diving. Just for thrills at first, but I got interested in flying, so I got a license and started taking jumpers, cash only. Then I wanted more money and found out I needed a degree to get a real pilot job. So I did it, at Hilo. Honors even. After a few years of island hopping, I put in for shuttles. Right place, right time. One thing led to another." I shrugged. "Still with Rice?"

"Forty-five years, next week. If I make it. I'm Emeritus now, but I still have a mail drop at the Bonner Lab. Son, do you have any delta V left at all?"

"Maybe five hundred meters per second from the chemical thrusters. But I'll need close to thirty thousand for rendezvous."

"Now, just how much drag will that contraption take?"

"None. It's not built for it, not at forty plus kilometers per second." The central cabin might have survived a high altitude brush, but the flimsy rectenna around it would have been torn away by the ghost of atmospheric gases. Even the dust in the ring plane would shred it to pieces.

"Then you should use what you have now. Raise your perijovian point as high as you can."

"Wait a minute. You're the astrophysicist, I'm the spaceship driver. Even if that maneuver got us out of the ring belt, it would blow the rendezvous phasing." The phasing was important. We might arrive at a point in Amalthea's orbit too long before or after the moon itself.

"Maybe. But when the power comes back on, it will give you a better chance to get away, and perhaps come back. Besides, maybe we can think of some other ideas."

"I'll check it with Callisto Equilateral."

"Judgment call, son. Why *don't* you have power? Who do you believe, them or me?"

"I think we should do it, now," Lu Sin interrupted. Surprised at her support for the risky maneuver, I stared at her. She was impassive.

"I suppose," I said. I didn't really have much choice; she was in charge.

"*Billybrown*, command override," Lu Sin said. "Rik?"

"Right. Okay. *Billybrown*, use all the chemical thruster fuel to raise perijovian as much as possible, no other constraints. Display the resulting trajectories."

The push and the displays arrived simultaneously. To my surprise our perijovian point rose almost to the orbit of Metis, at the edge of the rings. Almost.

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"Good show, son. That was the best you could do," Father said after the maneuver.

"We have a problem," Lu Sin stated. "Without chemical fuel for fuel cells, and without the microwave beam, we are on batteries. We will be out of power in about two hours, maybe four or five with extreme conservation." She must have known that. If Callisto E. didn't come back on line, we were dead anyway. How could she be so calm?

I watched my father's nod, the lightspeed delay still perceptible. "So you need some power. What are your resources? Do you have a crank generator?"

To turn my body fat into energy to live. No we didn't have one, but maybe. . . .

"We might fabricate one from something," Lu Sin said, "but I don't think we have time."

"Why," I complained, "is there only one power transmitter in the Jovian system?"

"Son, everything's a hodgepodge here. We threw it together as quick as we could when the field shut down. No regrets; we've had five great years of science and adventure. We all knew the risks and the short-cutting, so to heck with the recriminations. We use what we have . . . which . . . Lu Sin, Rik, it so happens we have the big radar array here on Amalthea, and a reactor to run it with. I can't give you a gigawatt, but would one megawatt help?"

Why didn't someone think of that before we used up our attitude control fuel? I started thinking about survival again. One-tenth of one percent power? More if I wasted fuel at lower specific impulse. Maybe. Certainly enough to lift the low point of our orbit out of the ring plane. "Yes, I think so, if it's close to our reception frequency. But now how are we going to orient our rectenna array?" I was speaking to myself as much as anyone else.

"Lu Sin?" Father asked in a tone that hinted something.

Lu Sin smiled. "Dr. Kolentz, I think I know. The squirrel cage."

"Ah, the old squirrel cage? The James White 'Lifeboat' scenario? Captain Sin, my hat's off to you. Rik? You got it?"

I shook my head. "What's a squirrel cage?" My mind wouldn't work and my irritation showed. When you're almost forty years old, you don't like being treated like a child by your elders. Besides, I had my own idea.

"Look, if we just grab the insides of this thing and pull it the right way, it should start to move. I mean, we'll move the other way in reaction until we grab on again, but the *Billybrown* should keep spinning the right way until we do."

"Huh! But that's exactly the principle, Rik! Now, just image running around the inside of your spaceship instead of twisting it. Push it with

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your feet, in other words. Like it was a circular cage and you were the squirrel."

I formed a mental image, which suddenly correlated with something I'd seen a long time ago. Astronauts running around in a circular room on one of the first space stations.

"Okay. We run one way, the spaceship turns the other. I've got the idea. But I don't think *Billybrown* will. It's too non-standard for the computer." A spacecraft's smooth voice interface can lead one to overestimate its intelligence, if one isn't careful. "But we can try."

"We'd best get on with it, Dr. Kolentz," Lu Sin said, determination in her voice, with a hint of—excitement? Was she actually enjoying this? "Thanks. End."

We were almost on a line between Callisto Equilateral and Amalthea, so what we had to do was to turn the rectenna over to face Amalthea. Lu Sin and I picked a circular path around the inside of the *Billybrown* least cluttered with pipes, hammocks, and other gear. Then we started pulling ourselves around it. Pretty soon, we'd given ourselves enough centrifugal gravity to run after a fashion; sort of skipping along, occasionally tripping, accumulating a variety of cuts and bumps.

With excruciating slowness, the spaceship started to turn in the other direction.

As I predicted, the spacecraft couldn't grasp what a squirrel cage did, and when we did it anyway, it tried to stop us with its reaction control system. But, of course, that system was out of fuel so its thrusters just cycled helplessly until Lu Sin overrode the program.

When we got the rectenna turned partway to Amalthea, and started getting a few watts from that direction, our idiot-savant finally caught on and adjusted to the new situation. That power source gave it a new referent, and enough power to use a couple of the clusterjets to finish the reorientation toward the radar beam from Amalthea. The people there were doomed, but they were diverting a large part of their station's power in an attempt to save us.

As the skylight turned away from both Jupiter and the sun, the cabin became pitch black, lit only by the bright lines and numbers on the displays. We saw stars through the skylight.

With help from another command override from Lu Sin, *Billybrown* was able to fire one percent of its thrusters at ten percent normal power. By using reaction mass at ten times our normal rate, we could get one percent thrust out of that much power. Nowhere near enough. We had started with ten times our dry mass in ammonia propellant—at this rate there wouldn't be enough left to let us complete the mission even if microwave power was restored.

"Look," Lu Sin said, pointing out the skylight.

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Among the steady stars, one was twinkling. The hundred-kilometer radius mesh reflector of Callisto Equilateral's microwave transmitter was moving, still tracking us, sending specular glints of sunlight instead of the gigawatt of power we needed.

22 milligauss.

No one has ever seen a magnetosphere start up before, but guesses were that, this close to Jupiter, half a gauss at the cloud tops would mean enough of a magnetic field to create enough high energy protons to kill us in a day. We were now up to one-twentieth of that, probably enough to warrant some low-dose preventative anticancer drugs when and if we returned.

Callisto Equatorial called, finally. The son of a traditional Korean farmer, Chunny Kim normally affected an easygoing rustic manner, but now he was sarcastic, and all business.

"*Billybrown,* Rik, Lu Sin. My extreme apologies. We'll have beam power momentarily. There was an extended debate on your mission. I'm afraid I've ended up in charge of what amounts to a mutiny, a sort of collective decision here that we don't let people die for the sake of one man's view of his authority. The problem was that even out here, the magnetosphere radiation increase was enough to trigger our powerplant shutdown cycle, and the station manager wouldn't allow a restart without an investigation. So we overruled him. We've got the telemetry on your fuel consumption, and I only hope it's not too late. Sorry. End."

"Chunny," Lu Sin replied, "We knew what we were getting into. Not your fault. I don't have the latest, but we're going to come awfully close to the rings. We've got to bring the rectenna around again, so we'll be ready for the power beam in about thirty minutes. End."

"*Billybrown,* roger that. Anyone ever tell you the most efficient place for maneuvers is the bottom of a gravity well? End." Chunny was a good one for finding silver linings. We relayed the message to Amalthea and started reorienting *Billybrown*'s rectenna to Callisto Equilateral, pairing clusterjets at opposing rim sections. We programmed for immediate thrust to raise our projected orbit out of the ring plane and flyby Amalthea, keeping options open.

We went on batteries again while the rectenna was edge-on to both transmitters. Then the pitch maneuver picked up speed as the beam from Callisto Equilateral started to illuminate more of the top of the rectenna. Before we realized it, the maneuver was done and the thrusters came on full power, dumping Lu Sin and me unceremoniously on the cabin floor. We'd spent so much reaction mass by then that acceleration was up to almost a tenth of a gravity, even at the higher exhaust velocity. When we scrambled back to our feet, somehow, she ended up in my arms. I was

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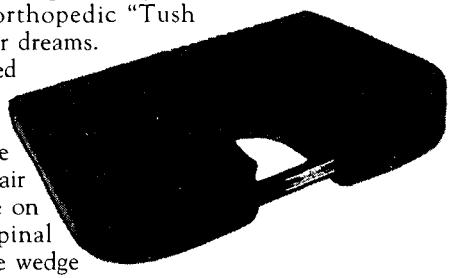

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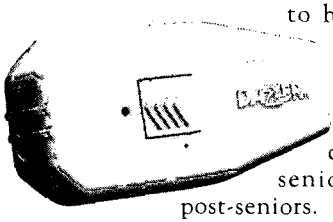

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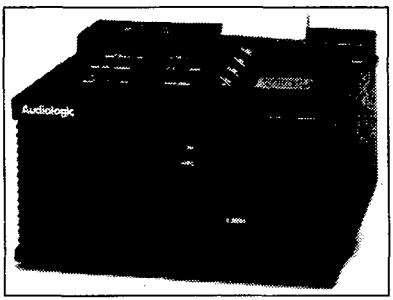

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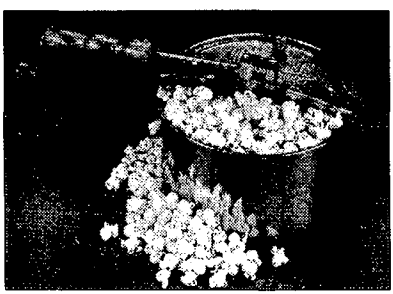

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about to apologize for the unintended intimacy, but she touched her finger to my lips, eyes glistening, then put her head on my shoulder and held. It felt like we stood there holding each other forever. Then, silently, as if a spoken word would shatter everything, we kissed.

Lu Sin finally disengaged, looked me straight in the eye. "This has been the most beautiful moment in my life, and you the most beautiful man. But we must never, never speak of this again."

She was certainly in enough trouble with the authorities and regulations without adding a charge of fraternization, or inappropriate conduct. I nodded, but I gently grasped her hand as well; we could speak to our hearts' content with a touch.

Her features firmed. "I think we need to get back to business."

We pulled up all the projections and directed an optimization search. The result was pretty much what we had figured it might be. Lu Sin made the call.

"Callisto Equilateral, *Billybrown*. We have just enough reaction mass to make the rendezvous with Amalthea, but not enough to return if we do. We have a decision to make. End."

"Roger, *Billybrown*. Best we could do is get a tank down there in five days with the cargo launcher. All the other ships are out now; the *Glasser* needs the beam as soon as you're done, but we'll stay with you as long as you need us. Let us know. End."

"So that's it. We have to go back." I stated the obvious.

"You cannot leave your father there, Rik."

"If it were only me, Lu Sin . . . But if we rendezvous, the radiation will kill you too."

"Maybe. But maybe the radiation will not get worse, or maybe another solution will occur to us. Those people have very little chance, but if we do not rendezvous, they have no chance. And please don't tell me I have no stake in this. Everything that I am is at stake in this." She gave me a resolute look. "I would rather die trying than live with the guilt of not trying. Is this not how you feel?" My first impulse was to say: Isn't thirty dead better than thirty-two dead? But I couldn't look her in the face and say that. I put my hand over hers.

"I'm scared. I'd rather not die. Just give me some hope we're going to lick this."

She smiled then, and kissed my cheek, and laughed lightly. "Very well, I shall. Now, Rik, the first thing we say to Amalthea will be to ask them how much ammonia they have."

What it came down to was that compared to this, if I thought about it, most of my life had been a meaningless pain in the ass anyway. If survival had been all that important to me, I would have insisted on going back. Besides, I still had a point to make, maybe one worth my life.

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Maybe the point *was* my life. Win or die. Remember the Alamo. Anyway, I was no speechmaking hero. I just stood there as Lu Sin directed the rendezvous maneuver.

23 milligauss.

We arrived at the L1 point of the Amalthea-Jupiter system, only a few dozen kilometers off the peak of Mount Barnard, the unofficial name for the pointy, Jupiter-facing part of Amalthea. From above, it was a massive ridge of bald rock, parallel to the orbit plane. It would have been an excellent place for an elevator. With an anchor in Jupiter's gravity on the other side of the L1 neutral gravity point, the tethertube would have been less than a hundred kilometers long, but I supposed there hadn't been time to build one.

Dr. Kolentz was angry. "This is a magnificent gesture. But it's not likely that you've accomplished anything but killing yourselves and ending my family line. Huh! Rik, you never *would* listen!"

"There's no point in giving up now," I snapped, with the irritation of someone who found himself on the wrong side of a sensible argument.

"Yes, I quite agree. But the only ammonia we have is what we piss, and that's too contaminated to do you any good. We do have some RCS fuel, enough to keep you from drifting away for a few weeks. I'll ferry it up myself. Then we'll talk, privately. End."

One of Amalthea station's utility scooters made the trip out with my father and two other people. I will never forget the look that passed between my father and Lu Sin as he floated through the inner door of the air lock.

"You've changed, too," she said, at last. Their hands touched. I felt I knew what that touch meant. A cloud of jealousy made a brief flight across my eyes and departed, evaporated by reason. Age, rank, and decades gone gave Dad priority. I could accept that.

"Lu Sin was one of my students, Rik." There was obviously more to it than that, but other people were around, and there was much to do.

But Father's off-color comment on ammonia sources started me thinking about other liquids.

25 milligauss.

"In the first place," the Callisto Equilateral engineer was saying, "the *Billybrown* was never meant to *land* anywhere. The hull's okay, but the ion rockets would get bent. Secondly, the cluster ion generators are not designed to work with water. Water, believe it or not, is a very corrosive material. Ah, tanks, valves, microscopic jets, they could all become clogged. The cluster formation hardware isn't designed for water. . . ."

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"Has it ever been tried?" I was getting impatient and overrode the incoming transmission. He'd get the interruption in six seconds.

". . . no one would be stupid enough to risk equipment on such a hare-brained idea. Um, over."

"Callisto E. My life is at stake here, as well as the lives of thirty other people. Over." He knew that, but I was angry now. This was the kind of mentality that got us into this mess in the first place by shutting down the Callisto Equilateral reactor. I stewed for a dozen seconds.

"*Billybrown*. That doesn't change the engineering. Ah, but it does change the priorities. We can jury-rig a test to feed water to some spare thrusters. Ah, how much time do we have? Over." Seconds went by. It's hard to be sarcastic with a ten second delay, but I managed.

"Callisto E. If *you* guys don't know, who does? The rate of magnetic field increase has leveled off so maybe we have more time than we thought. But it's not healthy even at this level. The sooner we get out of here, the better. End."

My father was motioning that he wanted to talk to me. I gave the comm panel a shove and floated over to him. Lu Sin and the others were outside working on the fuel transfer.

"We're playing this as if it were going to work," he said. "Everyone on the station is ready to go. Uh, about your mother. . . ."

I cut him off. "Supposing we can run the clusterjets on water, how are we going to get the water to the *Billybrown*? We'll need at least thirty tonnes to get to Callisto orbit, forty to get there as fast as we came, which might be a good idea considering the radiation build-up. That's a lot of ferry flights. Can we bring the spacecraft to the ground station?" The station was on the north rim of Pan crater, about halfway around the tiny moon from the peak of Mt. Barnard.

The old man got tense, and looked at me as if he were going to challenge my change of subject. Too bad. With a chance to get out of this alive, I could postpone the family history. He shrugged his shoulders and answered my question.

"Our surface gravity at Pan's rim is about half a percent. Can you hover in that with loaded tanks on one megawatt? Callisto Equilateral will be below our horizon for the next five hours, and the station antenna wouldn't be able to get a direct shot at you, so I'm not sure we'd be able to deliver that much power."

Not by microwave link, but . . .

"Dad, what's the output of your powerplant, total, not just what you can feed into the radar?"

"Um, about a hundred megawatts. Why?"

"Do you have a cable reel and a power line running out to Mt. Barnard?"

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70 milligauss.

Lu Sin and I had been awake for two universal days and had to sleep, radiation or not. The station personnel could handle the preparations. She went to the station, to sleep underground. I stayed with the ship.

When I woke up five hours later, and played back the overnight reports, it looked like old Jove really meant it. Callisto Equilateral reported that a magnetic bow shock had reformed off Jupiter, and the radiation level around here was getting definitely unhealthy. Fortunately, just about anything stops low energy sulfur nuclei, so things weren't quite as bad as the particle flux display was indicating, but the high energy proton population was way up, too.

Jupiter's bands were joining in too, displaying more color. I could see that through the skylight. And it had a new red spot, in the *north* tropical zone, though how this was connected with the return of the magnetic field, no one understood. The best answer I got was from one of Father's astrophysicists, who told me to think of Jupiter as a miniature sun in slow motion.

The Callisto Equilateral engineer called in with what he thought was bad news. Their tests showed that if we ran the clusterjets on pure water, they'd probably fail after a hundred hours. A water ammonia mixture would be better.

I politely reminded him that I only needed about eight hours of thrust, and that I would turn the ship in for refit as soon as I got home. I think he was still unhappy about the insult to the equipment.

Father and Lu Sin arrived soon after I ended the contact, looking smug about something.

"Everyone's ready at the base, their personal effects are packed to be picked up by robots later." Father announced. "What about the ship?"

"It should run okay with water mixed in with our remaining ammonia."

Bringing the *Billybrown* in over the north rim of Pan was one tricky operation. The jokes about extension cords for electric rockets go back to the twentieth century, but this is the first time I think one has ever been used. We hovered directly over the radar antenna while the power cable was lofted and quickly welded onto the leads we had exposed. Thus freed from beamed power, the ship, followed by the cable reel on the ground, floated over to the station tank farm, where a hose was fitted.

There were a hundred problems: fused circuit breakers, hose coupling sizes, ion jet splash effects, to name a few; and a hundred solutions to go with them. It was done in a day.

Then the station cameras captured one of the stranger sights in the history of astronautics and electric rockets. Carrying the scientists, their families, and as much water as it could, the *Billybrown*, its rectenna

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looking like a big floppy hat brim, floated over the Amalthean landscape and up Mount Barnard, trailing the powerline behind it. We ramped the exhaust velocity of our clusterjets up toward maximum fuel economy as Amalthea's surface gravity dropped off to about a milligee approaching the top of the mountain. Soon we were back in free fall.

I found out too late that someone had to stay behind to cut the power. The connection at the spacecraft end was a hurriedly welded kludge, and one doesn't simply pull the wire off a hundred megawatt lead; the arc explosion would be like setting off dynamite. Things were so hectic that I didn't notice who stayed until it was too late.

"Dad, damnit! Why *you?"* Dad was down there on the surface alone. The nearest transport was back at Pan's Rim, a hundred kilometers away. You don't maneuver something the mass of the *Billybrown* like a helicopter, and even in milligravity, the flimsy rectenna would droop to the ground without the support of the clusterjets.

"Someone had to, son, and I'm an old man. Besides, I always wanted to be in charge of a world, and now I am. This is the ringside seat for the magnetosphere turn-on, and I'm not going to miss the show." *What nonsense!*

"Dad!" I protested. "There's nothing to see; the only way you could know the magnetosphere is there is by watching the instruments like the rest of us, and by getting a fatal dose of radiation sickness."

"Leon!" Lu Sin interjected, displaying emotion for a second time in my memory, but economically. It was the first time I could remember her calling him by his first name. She seemed more irritated than worried.

"Oh, well. If you insist. Rik, how long until perijovian?"

"Huh? About half an hour?"

"That should be close enough. If you have a telescope, you can watch me jump."

"Dad, you can't jump off a moon this big. Escape velocity is . . ."

"You're the big pilot? You should check your orbit mechanics. Here I come."

Lu Sin looked surprised for a moment, then grinned. The two of them looked like a couple of doting parents who had just hidden an Easter egg and were waiting for me to find it. I shook my head, maintained my dignity, and waited to see what would happen.

Lu Sin had the *Billybrown* point the docking camera down at Father's position on the mountain peak. There was a brilliant flash a hundred meters north of him and our power meter went back to zero: Father had severed the powerline at the surface with an explosive charge. We waited. We were already three kilometers out, so all we could see of Dad was a white dot. But yes, he started getting larger. Soon we could see a figure in vacuum gear floating along, guiding himself on what was left

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of the power cable. In half an hour, there was a knock on our airlock door.

"So," Lu Sin said, once we were settled. "The peak of Mt. Barnard actually sticks *beyond* its L1 point at perijovian."

"On the high side of its orbital eccentricity cycle, anyway. Which is where we are now. Why do you *think* the summit is so clean?" Father rumbled. I felt like an idiot. "Jupiter pulls the dust off! Come on, son, have a sense of humor!"

I should have felt embarrassed, humiliated, or something. But what I got was a funny kind of pride instead. That was *my* dad who jumped off a moon! A few minutes before he would have fallen off, anyway. I found a laugh, hesitant at first, then full-bodied. Even Lu Sin joined in.

We still had to wait a tense half an hour for Callisto Equilateral to come out from behind Jupiter. Protons at these energies went right through our ship's hull and my accumulated dose was over a rad. Everyone else, except Lu Sin, had received more.

The children had been housed underground, for the most part, at the science station, since the magnetosphere started coming back on, but now they were exposed. Their only hope was speed and distance.

210 milligauss.

The magnetic field strength at the Jovian cloudtops was approaching that found at Earth's surface. Jupiter's magnetosphere was back in force, and growing, already roughly a thousand times the volume of Earth's. Beyond Europa, we were out of the woods for the moment, but like in *Macbeth*, the woods were *chasing* us; Jupiter's new outer Van Allen belt was expanding toward the orbit of Ganymede faster than we were coasting out. Nothing we could do about that; our water reaction mass was gone; we saved only what we needed for minimum life support.

The cabin was a crowded inferno. At about forty Celsius, the fourth power law of thermal radiation, as applied to the skin of the *Billybrown*'s cabin, saved us from cooking ourselves with our own body heat, but it was not comfortable. Most of the thirty people preferred to remain in their hammocks, hooked up to the overloaded air system, trying to sleep the ordeal away. But there were six children to contend with, two of them too young to understand what was happening. The zero-gee toilet had given up, and we were down to sharing relief tubes. In twenty years, perhaps, we'd laugh about all that. Perhaps.

Guts don't sag in zero gravity; they sit up high and impressive, especially when attached to a chest of matching expanse. Close up, my father's magnificent belly eclipsed the rim of his shorts. He was that close so that he could speak privately. Curiously, a private conversation was now a possibility because of the din around us.

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"Rik. Look, Marienne had reasons for leaving me. At least she felt so. She was beautiful, but within a year of our marriage, I was seeing other women; colleagues, students, who had a lot more to offer in intellectual companionship. She couldn't handle it. Maybe she would have, except that one of these other ladies had an accident which I had to take care of."

"Lu Sin?" I asked, not really wanting to believe it. "I could see there was something between you."

"Lu Sin came from an unsophisticated culture, Rik. She was a good engineering student, but very naïve about . . . relationships. By the time she stopped trying to deny it to herself, it was too late for an abortion. We had an unplanned child."

"Where is this going? What does this have to do with me? Lu Sin is special to you, I understand. Do I have another brother or a sister somewhere? Are you going to marry her?"

He raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "If we survive, perhaps. But . . ." then he looked straight at me, challenging, unapologetic. "Rik, *you* were that child. Marienne raised you as if you were her own for ten years. Then, well, it got to be too much for her. She didn't handle it well, but I can forgive that."

I had older brothers that I always thought got more of Mom's affection. I'd always put that down to sibling rivalry. Somehow the news didn't bother me that much, as if I'd been expecting something like that. But Lu Sin! What we'd almost shared made my blood run cold now.

"Lu Sin is my biological mother? Does she know?"

"I think so." What does it take, to watch from afar so long, and be silent. To embrace, and be silent. "She was so *young*, Rik." He smiled. "Do you know, I think she can still have children!"

No, Dad. You can't *mean* that.

My father is not a conventional man, and I still have problems dealing with the insatiable Don Juan that resides in the same body with that towering intellect and unconquerable will. Perhaps I am being taught how to love without judgment. And if I learn *that* lesson, perhaps I will not live the rest of my life alone.

4200 milligauss.

No one is really sick yet, but it doesn't look good. Jupiter's new magnetosphere is not a carbon copy of its old one; more tilt, more field, more radiation. Even Callisto orbit won't be safe.

We arrived at Callisto Equilateral with about a year's worth of allowed cumulative dose under our belts, sustained in a week. Refugees were straggling in from Io, Ganymede, and Metis. The Europa station has gone underwater in hopes that they can survive long enough for shielded

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transport to be developed. A small fleet is on the way from Earth. It should get here in a year. They have some new antiradiation drugs.

The main part of Callisto Equilateral is a wheel with life support for a nominal three thousand people. There are now about 4200 present, and interplanetary transport for maybe five hundred. The hope now is that the Himalia base can be made self sustaining and expanded, and we're using the transport to shuttle back and forth. Eventually, the whole wheel will be moved out to that orbit; but that, too, will take years. Chunny and Dad think it can be done; the rest of us are believing, hoping, working our tails off. Maybe, just maybe. Meanwhile, I have my first command in sight.

I've been appointed first officer on the *Glasser*, evacuating the pregnant women and younger children to the outer moon, Himalia. Lu Sin is in command on the trip out, but someone has to bring it back, and I'm in line for that.

Lu Sin is the most disciplined, logical person I know, and her pregnancy is the craziest, most illogical thing any person I know has ever done. It was as if she felt she had made a pact with the universe whereby if it bowed to her will for three hundred and sixty-four days, she would surrender on the three hundred and sixty-fifth, no questions asked. It's either that or it's the exact opposite; maybe having a child is a woman's way of spitting in the face of eternity when it crowds her. Anyway, no one questions a heroine. I don't think any genetic tests will ever be made. Dad is sure the baby is his, and that's the way it's going to be.

So, I've got a sister on the way. I look at Lu Sin and think she will be very, very beautiful.

"Let's have you take the con, Rik. I'm going to sit back and watch, unless you blow it."

I nod and run through the checks. The ship is clean and bright inside, structurally the same as the *Billybrown*, but with all the panels, lights and creature comforts intact. Kids play vacuum tag in a net cage while their mothers and aunts discuss setting up new households with the adventurous spirit of pioneers. Someone made a sign which hangs from the big cargo cage bolted on behind us. Himalia or Bust, it says. I've checked everything that can be rechecked.

"Ready, Mom?"

She nods sharply, professionally.

"*Glasser*, start thrust," I command. The acceleration warning tone chimes.

"Roger. Prepare for 1 percent gravity, five seconds."

The caged children drift gently to the floor with cries of protest as thrust begins, the first of many insults to their so-far idyllic childhoods in a scientific Eden.

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"Dr. Kolentz sends his wishes to everyone for a good voyage," the ship told us. Dad is in charge of Himalia now. The best person in the Jovian system to bluster the place together, so everyone thinks, so I think. The more things change . . . When I look at Lu Sin, whatever is supposed to kick in to prevent me from feeling *that* way about her because I know that she is my biological mother, doesn't kick in. Not at all. But there is nothing whatever to do or say about that, either.

Outside, a major part of the solar system is returning to normal, complete with its rules and its deadly radiations. But, when we touch, I remember, and so does she. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Nebula-winner **Gregory Benford,** author of the famous novel *Timescape* and one of the most popular and acclaimed writers of his generation, returns to these pages next month with our stunning August cover story, a huge (almost novel-length), vividly colored, and wildly inventive new novella, "Soon Comes Night." Epic in scope and cosmic in sweep as the best of the old-fashioned "super-science" space operas, this is the story of an embattled family. Torn from their place in the cosmos by the attack of an implacable and immensely powerful alien enemy, they must hunt through time and space to the ends of the universe and the last tick of time itself, dogged by this relentless enemy, to find one last desperate chance of going home.... This is definitely Benford's most important work at shorter lengths for some time, and will almost certainly be one of the year's major stories. Don't miss it! (The evocative cover is by well-known SF artist Bob Eggleton.)

ALSO IN AUGUST: hot new British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** takes us to a mining colony on Mercury on a trouble-shooting mission that runs into troubles *considerably* more bizarre than anyone could ever have anticipated having to deal with, in the fascinating story of "Cilia-Of-Gold": new writer **Valerie J. Freireich** then takes us from deep space to the churches and palaces of fifteenth century Spain, for a compelling little story that is both a study of Alternate History and a sobering cautionary tale, in the compassionate "Soft Rain": **Ian McDowell** takes on both children's television programming *and* the recent big upsurge in Dino Madness with a slyly satirical, blackly funny, and suspensefully fast-paced look at TV's newest star, the one-and-only "Bernie": **Steven Utley** returns to show us how the past can be very different indeed when you're actually "Living It": and **Rob Chilson** takes us to a disquieting future for a look at the *true* meaning of horror, in a powerful story that proves that "Dead Men Rise Up Never." Plus **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column, and an array of other columns and features.

Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstands on June 21, 1994, or subscribe today!

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FUTURE PAST: AN EXERCISE IN HORROR

Assume tomorrow has already come and gone
and you now inhabit no more than a string of
damaged yesterdays haunted by the ghostly

penumbra of your abridged anticipations,
a shadow corridor where all perspectives
are reduced to parameters of expiration.

Suppose the future has left you in its wake
and all that you once expected to transpire
has passed beyond the borders of your ken,

that the past is now your dwelling place
and every turn you take only leads you
further astray from what may have been.

Imagine yourself swirling backward in the
flumed tunnel of history, falling heart over
heels into the graves of forgotten ancestors,

inclusive dates and faceless names incised
on upright stone soon washed by the ages.
Remember breath vanished from the glass.

Somewhere in a secret and sealed chamber
—or perhaps in some glistening blue grotto
where luminous fishes glide the depths of

limpid pools and iridescent lichen abound
to shimmer the air with narcoleptic mists—
the wraiths of your abandoned possibilities

gather in silent concert to toast the shadow
limits of your life, to seduce the passing
seconds that still pulse within your wrists.

—Bruce Boston

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M. Shayne Bell

brings hope and heartbreak to a story that is as fragile and as beautiful as ...

MRS. LINCOLN'S CHINA

Illustration by Gina Mohr

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So I stayed in the crowd across the street from the east gates to the White House. My son Cyril, he'd said to me, "Momma, I know how bad you want a cup of Mrs. Lincoln's to drink your coffee from, but stay back from those gates. If you're pressed up next to them, you're liable to get crushed before they give way. You don't have to be the first one in the White House to get a cup. You just come along when you can."

I figured there was some truth to his words. Three years before, my daughter Lydia Ann, who was just sixteen years old at the time, went early to the AC/DC reunion concert because the seating was open and she wanted to sit up close. She liked the drummer, and if you sit up close and take binoculars you can see everything there is to see about a man sitting on stage in front of you, down to the kind of socks he's wearing, but a crowd formed up behind her and started shoving forward and my Lydia Ann thought she was going to suffocate in the press of people before security opened the gates, and even then six people got trampled to death when everybody rushed forward, so I looked at the crowd outside the White House gates and thought to myself, Georgia May, you want a cup of Mrs. Lincoln's because you love her husband and a cup of theirs would make you remember all the good he did, but there's no sense in risking your life for a cup President Lincoln might have drank coffee out of, so I took my Cyril's advice and hung back.

Besides, I figured I had the advantage over most folks in that crowd: Most of them had come just to take whatever they could get because they'd gone without for so long, and to maybe in the process scare the folks in power into running this country like it was meant to be a place where people could live a decent life. But me, I was going in with a plan. I knew just what I wanted to take from the White House. I'd toured the White House two years before and seen the China Room, and I'd looked and looked at Mrs. Lincoln's china and thought how she and the president I loved had eaten off those dishes, and when I started to see how things were going to go in this city and what was likely to take place with or without my blessing, I made up my mind to be in the crowd that would sweep into the White House and pick it clean, but I'd go there looking for one thing: a cup from Mrs. Lincoln's china—oh that, and maybe the saucer to go with it and a plate or two if I could get them, which explains the two sacks I'd brought along to carry the dishes in and the old dish towels I'd brought to wrap them in to keep them from chipping, but I would have truly settled for just one coffee cup.

It was a hot late-August day, and about noon the crowd quieted down. It was hard to keep up the yelling and screaming when you were so hot you could hardly stand it and sweat was making wet tracks down the front and back of your blouse and all you could think of was how you wanted a cold drink of some kind, maybe a Coke with lots of ice.

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Some people tried to keep up the screaming and meant to rouse the rest of us to it, but it wasn't working. Only a few people yelled along with them, and I certainly didn't, not then. I started to wonder if we'd get in the White House at all or if we'd give up in that heat and go home, then try again in the evening or later at night, but I hoped we wouldn't have to rush the White House at night, because I didn't want to rush it in the dark. Storming a place like the White House seemed scary enough without adding darkness on top of it, when suddenly the marines guarding the gates just walked away and disappeared inside the East Wing. Everybody in the crowd was trying to see what was happening, standing on tiptoes and looking, and suddenly it made sense to me: they were giving up. They were opening the place up to us without bloodshed. We were going to get in the White House after all, and in the broad daylight. The president and everybody else inside were probably gone already, out tunnels in the basement, whisked off to Camp David, or who cares where.

The gates were locked, so people started climbing over them and the fence and walking a little warily up to the White House, almost like they were going to buy tickets and take a tour. Two nice young girls gave me a hand up to the top of the fence, and we all three jumped down together onto the grass on the other side and made our way up the lawn toward the doors of the East Wing Lobby. The doors were swung wide when I got to them and shoved my way inside, but some folks were already trying to shove their way outside, their arms full of figurines and paintings and the like, no dishes yet. I saw a lot of people just standing around looking at the rooms and the things in them and at each other, amazed that we were inside like this and that nobody was trying to stop us.

For a minute, it seemed as if the spirit of the place settled over us: here we were in the mansion where the great and powerful presidents of this land had lived, some of them good people, and it didn't seem right, somehow, to just tear into the place and start taking things or breaking them right away. But somebody outside threw a rock and busted out one of the front windows, and somebody inside started yanking down the drapes, and I knew the craziness was starting. I made a beeline for the China Room.

And who should I find standing in the doorway but my own son Cyril.

"What kept you, Momma?" he asked.

I was about to explain the fence I'd climbed, which I didn't find as easy a thing to do as I used to, when he grinned at me and held up a cup of Mrs. Lincoln's white china with a gold edge around the top and a purple border below and the eagle that represented this country. The cup looked so regal, yet fragile, in Cyril's hand, while the breaking and the shouting grew and grew all around us. Cyril put the cup in my hands. It felt cool

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and clean. It wasn't dusty at all. Someone had taken good care of this cup.

"I want a saucer, too," I said, while I wrapped the cup in a dish towel and put it in my sack. "Wasn't there one with it?"

Cyril stepped back so I could walk past him into the room, which was empty of people. Cyril's friends, Randy Lewis and Vincent Henry, were standing in the other doorway, and they grinned at me—they were holding back all the people to give me first chance at what I wanted.

"We can't hold back these people long, Momma," Cyril said. "You've got to hurry."

So hurry I did. I went straight to the Lincoln china on display in its china cabinet. I knew right where it was. All the china was displayed in order of the president, starting at the right of the fireplace with pieces from the Washingtons' personal china and stretching around the room to a place setting from the present president's set. In the spot for the Lincolns' china was a display of just eleven pieces from Mrs. Lincoln's first set, including the saucer that went with my cup. Most of the 175 pieces of Lincoln china left were kept up in the president's private quarters or down in a basement storage area which I wouldn't have time to find. I opened the cabinet door, took out the saucer, wrapped it quick and put it in my sack.

That's when the lights went out. It being the middle of the day, plenty of light still came in from the windows, but the riot was clearly getting worse. I started wrapping and packing as quick as I could: a dinner plate, an ice cream plate, a tea cup and saucer. I'd pretty well finished wrapping the Lincoln display—water mug, three fruit baskets, custard cup, and everything—when the shooting started, away off by the East Wing Lobby. Cyril ran up and took my arm. "You've got to go, Momma," he said.

People had rushed into the China Room once Cyril left the doorway, and they started smashing the dishes in the cabinets and tearing at the paintings on the walls and breaking out the windows. I grabbed up a few more dishes and shoved them in my sack. I decided to chance the chipping, since I didn't have time to wrap them. It wasn't safe to stay here any longer. Cyril took my other sack and ran around the room shoving dishes into it, I didn't know then from what services, and he came back and pulled me toward the door. I kicked the cabinet door shut behind me on the off chance of saving what we left behind.

The crowd was going wild, breaking and tearing at anything they could. "Stop it!" I wanted to shout. "These are good dishes—take them home and use them." But nobody would have listened—nobody could have heard me in that noise. Some fat man tried to kick my sack of china, but I swung it out of the way, and Cyril punched the man's face.

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"Come on, Momma!" Cyril shouted.

"I'm coming!" I shouted back.

But I couldn't help it. I picked up an unbroken bowl thrown down on the rug and two wine goblets from I didn't know which services on the way out of the China Room and stuffed them in my sack. Cyril helped me out of the White House through a back door and across the lawn to the fence, which surprised me. I thought he'd spend all his time in the White House having the fun he'd come to have with his friends. But he helped me over the fence, then handed me my sack of Lincoln china and his sack of odds and ends. I ran off down the street toward my apartment, and he ran off back toward the White House. I didn't see Cyril again for three days.

I lugged my china home and got it up the dark stairs to my door. The lights were out in the stairwell. I still managed to get my key out of my pocket in the front of my skirt and open the door by feel without having to set down the china and chance chipping it any more. I carried the sacks into the bedroom and carefully set them down on the bed. Then I opened the drapes to let in the sunlight and looked out the window.

There were fires everywhere in the city, and smoke rising up from one point of the horizon to the other, not to mention the shooting and the deeper sound of what must have been cannons over by Annapolis. Seeing and hearing all that made me sick at heart. I started to wonder, what if they come to burn the building I live in? I thought maybe I shouldn't unpack the china in my sacks. If I had to run, I could pick up those sacks and run with them.

So I spent the evening getting ready to run. I locked the doors to keep people out till I was ready to go. Then I tried to call Lydia Ann, but the phones were dead. So I wrapped the Lincoln china I hadn't had time to wrap, this time in my good dish towels, and when I ran out of those in my good pillow cases, which I'd want to take if I had to abandon everything else. I didn't bother with Cyril's sack of odds and ends china because I didn't even know what was in there and I wasn't sure I had time. Once I'd squared away the Lincoln china and packed up some food and an extra change of clothes and took out the money I'd hid behind the fridge and stuffed it into the box of Shredded Wheat cereal I planned to take, I sat by the window in the bedroom and watched and listened to the riot and worried about Lydia Ann and Cyril.

When night came, the city was lit up by fire. The shooting never stopped till three in the morning, when it stopped all of a sudden for about twenty minutes, all over the city. I stood by the window then, looking out and wondering if the craziness was over so soon, but of course

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it wasn't. It started up again. I sat by my bedroom window all the rest of that night and into the morning, watching.

By noon, since I hadn't had to run yet, I figured I might not have to. So I pulled all the drapes and dragged chairs in front of the door to block it and took a nap on the couch. I didn't want to move the china unless I had to, considering the pieces I hadn't wrapped in the second sack and the chipping I'd cause, so I left it all on the bed.

When I woke up, it was dark. I tried the lights, but the power was still off. I felt my way into the black kitchen and pulled matches out of a drawer and lit a candle. I tried the phone to call Lydia Ann again and Cyril, but the phone was still dead. I tried to cook some supper, but the water was off, so I just made sandwiches out of the cheese and tomatoes in the fridge before they spoiled and drank some of the water I had left in a pitcher. Then I carried my candle into the bedroom so I could take a look at the china in Cyril's sack of odds and ends and wrap it.

I reached in and pulled out a plate with a blue border and gold stems of wheat painted in that border. The American eagle was pictured in the white middle of the plate. I didn't know which president and his wife had had such a plate. I reached in and pulled out a dessert plate that had a pretty white flower in the middle. The back of the plate said Syringa, and below that Idaho. I figured the Syringa must have been Idaho's state flower, but I didn't know which president's wife had ordered this plate either. I pulled out the two crystal wine goblets that were the last things I'd taken. They were simple in design, but lovely.

I took the candle and went after the Margaret Brown Klapthor book *Official White House China: 1789 to the Present* which I'd bought after the White House tour I'd taken two years before and carried the book into the bedroom. I put the candle on the nightstand and knelt by the bed and started leafing through the book looking for pictures of china that matched the china and goblets I had on my bed.

The plate with gold wheat and the blue border turned out to be President Harrison's. Mrs. Caroline Harrison had painted the wheat herself, the guidebook said, back in the days when women did that sort of thing. I picked up the plate and looked at it again. The wheat was beautifully painted, and I realized that Caroline Harrison had been a real artist. Her work looked professionally done, to me.

The plate with the flower in the middle was the Johnsons'. The guidebook said Lady Bird had ordered a service of china that pictured wildflowers, not the state flowers, of all fifty states and DC. People used to go on tours hoping to see the wildflower from their state on display in a place setting from Lady Bird's china. I pulled two more plates from that service out of Cyril's sack. They pictured the California poppy and the

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Oregon grape, which meant I'd ended up with plates of the western states. I wished Cyril had picked out the plate with DC's flower on it. I didn't even know DC had an official flower, let alone a wildflower. Maybe they'd used the dandelion or some other weed that grew up between cracks in the sidewalks.

I started looking to see if I could match a picture to the wine goblets, when there was a burst of gunfire just up the street from my building. I blew out the candle and didn't move in the sudden darkness. I heard shouting and more firing, then running in the alleyway below my window. I was glad I'd pulled the drapes so no one could have seen my light before it was gone altogether. I knelt there next to my bed and smelt the smoke from the candle and listened to the shouting and the shots and thought of my Cyril and Lydia Ann, wondering what was happening to them. When things had quieted down outside, I reached out and touched the smooth china of one of the Johnsons' dessert plates: the people who'd ordered these plates were the people who'd dreamed of a great society. It hadn't lasted long. It hadn't even been many years before the ugly billboards Mrs. Johnson had had torn down all over the country were put back up and you couldn't walk down a street or take a bus ride anywhere without having gaudy billboards scream at you to buy this or that bit of nonsense. It was all tacky and cheap. Tacky and cheap was what too many people tried to make all of our lives and the world around us. But Mrs. Johnson had tried to fight that trend, and she and her husband had dreamed dreams, and worked as if they could make a difference in the world, and ordered china with delicate wildflowers on them. It had been a time when grace and beauty had stood a chance.

Over the next two days, I catalogued the china I'd taken: of the Lincoln china, one dinner plate, one custard cup, one fish platter, one regular platter, one water jug, one ice cream plate, three fruit baskets, a tea cup and saucer, and a coffee cup and saucer; of the Johnson china, one plate, three dessert plates; of the Harrison china, one plate, one coffee cup and saucer; and in addition, two Kennedy wine goblets and one Hayes soup bowl with a crab painted on it. I wrapped everything in my best pillow cases and dish towels and kept them in sacks at the foot of my bed, ready for me to pick up and run with if I had to. I also wrapped two green depression-glass plates of my mother's and put them in the sacks. I'd want them, too, if I had to leave everything else.

Three days after we'd stormed the White House, Cyril came knocking on my door. I recognized his voice, of course, so I dared drag away the chairs and unlock the door, and there stood Cyril with sacks of food in his arms.

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"I thought you might be needing a few things, Momma," he said.

I hugged him and cried a little, and asked him if he'd seen or heard from Lydia Ann, which he hadn't. I'd already decided I had to go and find her and help her if she needed it, but I decided to tell Cyril about that decision a little later. I asked him to tell me where he'd gotten the food, but he wouldn't say much about that. I made him stay while I cooked supper for us both. The gas was still on, and I'd dipped out all the clean water from the toilet reservoir, so I had water to boil with and drink. Cyril had brought me potatoes and a canned ham and all kinds of other canned things, soups and green peas, and even a jar of instant Taster's Choice coffee. I put the ham in the oven to heat through and set the potatoes to boil and decided to set the table with the Lincoln china.

I brought out my nicest white tablecloth and spread it over the table. The tablecloth had been my momma's, and it was way too big for any table I'd ever had, but I thought it was the tablecloth I should use with the Lincoln china. It hung down low, nearly to the floor, but it looked fine even so. I set the lit candle in the middle of the table. Then I unwrapped the Lincoln dinner plate for me and the fish platter for Cyril and set them out. They looked so pretty on my table, the dark purple of the border set off by my white tablecloth. The candlelight glistened off the china. I could imagine the president and Mrs. Lincoln hosting a state dinner, maybe for the ambassador from Japan who would have come dressed in a kimono for men or whatever it was men wore in Japan back then, and all of them eating in just the kind of light Cyril and I were going to eat in. I unwrapped and polished the coffee cup and the tea cup and their saucers and set them out for the coffee. My shoddy old flatware looked sad beside all the presidential finery, but it would have to do.

Cyril stacked the furniture back in front of the door, then just sat at the table while I cooked, he was so tired. He told me he'd gone to talk to Randy Lewis, who had a shortwave radio and batteries to run it on, and that Randy had heard there was fighting and rioting all over the country. None of the networks were on, so we couldn't have gotten any news even if we'd had power to run a TV or radio.

The potatoes finished cooking, and I whipped them by hand with butter that hadn't quite spoiled yet and canned Sego milk, which works in potatoes when you don't have anything else. The whipping took a while, but Cyril and I both like our potatoes whipped, so I stuck with the whipping till it was done. I opened the canned peas and boiled them, then set water to boil for the coffee. When the ham was heated, I sliced it and made a gravy and we sat down to eat.

The food looked so good, and it smelled so good, and in the candlelight it seemed the shooting and the screams were far off, somehow, though of course they really weren't. It struck me as a rare blessing that a

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mother and her son could sit down to a decent supper in times like these, and I was grateful to Cyril for his thoughtfulness to me.

I dished myself some potatoes and handed Cyril the bowl. "I'm going to walk over to Lydia Ann's apartment tomorrow when it's light and try to find her," I said.

Cyril looked up at me and took the potatoes.

"I'll go look for her after supper," he said. "Don't you go out yet, not even in the day. It will be safer for me to go in the dark."

I covered my potatoes with gravy and handed Cyril the gravy bowl. "If you go tonight to look for your sister, I'm going with you. I can't stand this not knowing about Lydia Ann."

He took the gravy and shook his head.

"Don't tell me no," I said, serving myself a slice of the ham. "I'm her momma, and I have to know if she's all right. If you say the darkness is safer, I'll go tonight in the dark, and I'll go alone if I have to."

He took the ham and didn't say anything. I'd told him about my decision to search for Lydia Ann in the same tone of voice I always used with my children to tell them the discussion was over and that trying to convince me to change my mind was a waste of time. He still recognized that tone of mine. We dished up some green peas and started eating.

"Is the water ready for the coffee?" Cyril asked.

I'd left it boiling on the stove. Cyril got up to get it and the jar of coffee, but the shoelace hooks in his boots caught the tablecloth and Cyril stumbled and jerked the tablecloth forward and the candle fell over and went out and I heard Cyril hit the floor and dishes shattering around him.

I couldn't move. I just sat there in the dark till I heard Cyril start getting up. I went for the matches then and another candle and bumped into Cyril and told him to stand still and asked if he was hurt and got a match and struck it and lit the candle and held it up. Cyril and I looked at each other, then at the table.

"Oh, Cyril," I said, but he didn't say anything, not I'm sorry or even, Well, look at that. He seemed too stunned to say anything to me, then. The fish platter was on the floor and busted, together with the tea cup and saucer and my old bowl I'd put the peas in—all busted. But the ham and the potatoes and my plate of food and the coffee cup and saucer were still on the table. He hadn't pulled off the whole tablecloth. I got the broom and dustpan and started sweeping up the pieces, and the sound of that china tinkling into my dustpan sounded like a judgment on us all and I started to cry, and Cyril said he'd finish sweeping so I handed him the broom, but I got out rags and tried to wipe up the mess off the floor, which wasn't easy considering how little water I had, and all the while I was crying. Everything was just too much for me then. When the

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mess was cleaned up and the tablecloth straightened, I sat back in my chair and just looked at my food sitting on a Lincoln plate while Cyril dished himself some more food onto a regular melmac plate out of my cupboard.

"What have we done, Cyril?" I said.

"The dishes would have all been broken anyway, if we'd left them sitting in the White House, Momma."

But that was not the point.

"Eat, Momma, if you want to feel up to going for a walk with me to Lydia Ann's," he said.

"Don't patronize me," I said.

I stopped my crying and stood up and got myself a melmac plate out of the cupboard and scraped my food onto it off of the Lincoln plate. Then I ever so carefully washed the Lincoln plate and didn't begrudge it the water. I wrapped it up in a fine dishtowel and put it and the unbroken cup and saucer back with the other dishes in the sack. Then I hid the sacks in the broom closet, where thieves wouldn't spend much time looking, I thought, if they came in here.

The china I'd taken was a duty I had assumed. I realized that now. It represented a heritage not mine alone. The day would come when other people besides me would want to take a look at Mrs. Lincoln's china, and Mrs. Johnson's and Mrs. Harrison's. They'd want to look and remember the dreams we'd once had in this country and the kind of lives folks had once led. Till that time, I had a duty to safeguard what had become my charge. Wouldn't the people in power someday be surprised when I walked up and handed them the china and said, Look here at what I've saved for all of us.

And I got other ideas. I sat back down to eat my cold food and told Cyril what I was thinking. "The minute it starts to look safe," I said, "I want to walk back to the White House and take a look around. I'll bet there's a cup or two that didn't get busted and maybe a saucer thrown on the rug that didn't break or get trampled. There will be things here and there that I can pick up and bring back to save and take care of. Maybe I'm being called to do this, Cyril, or maybe I'm calling myself. It's folks like me, I guess, who will have to make ourselves responsible for saving some of our heritage through this time."

He looked at me for a while, then finally started eating again. "I'll go with you to the White House," he said. "I don't want you going up there alone."

"I'd be glad for your help," I said, and I thought how saving things like a president's china would give us a purpose to get us through the troubled days ahead.

While I cleared off the table, Cyril told me how Randy Lewis had heard

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on his shortwave that they were talking about setting up a temporary capital in either Denver or St. Paul. "I imagine they'll fight now over which one of those cities gets to be capital for a while," I said.

Meanwhile, we had the living to take care of, and a job to do after that. Little by little, we'd put the world back right.

I sent Cyril to pull the furniture away from the door again, while I dressed in my black dress so I'd look inconspicuous out on the streets. Then I set matches and a candle by the door for when I got back, blew out the candle, and locked the door behind me. Mrs. Lincoln's china was safe, for now, in my broom closet. I set out with Cyril to find my Lydia Ann. ●

THE CLOWN DOLL

He comes from the straw-
covered fairgrounds,
cotton-candy-stained,
jingle-bell man
lugging a carny smile.
But he has seen the underside
world:
bats in the ferris wheel,
circus rapes,
the gamesters' stolen hoards.
Lying on the shelf
waiting to be won,
too often
he has witnessed
the happy lights
go out.

—Wendy Rathbone

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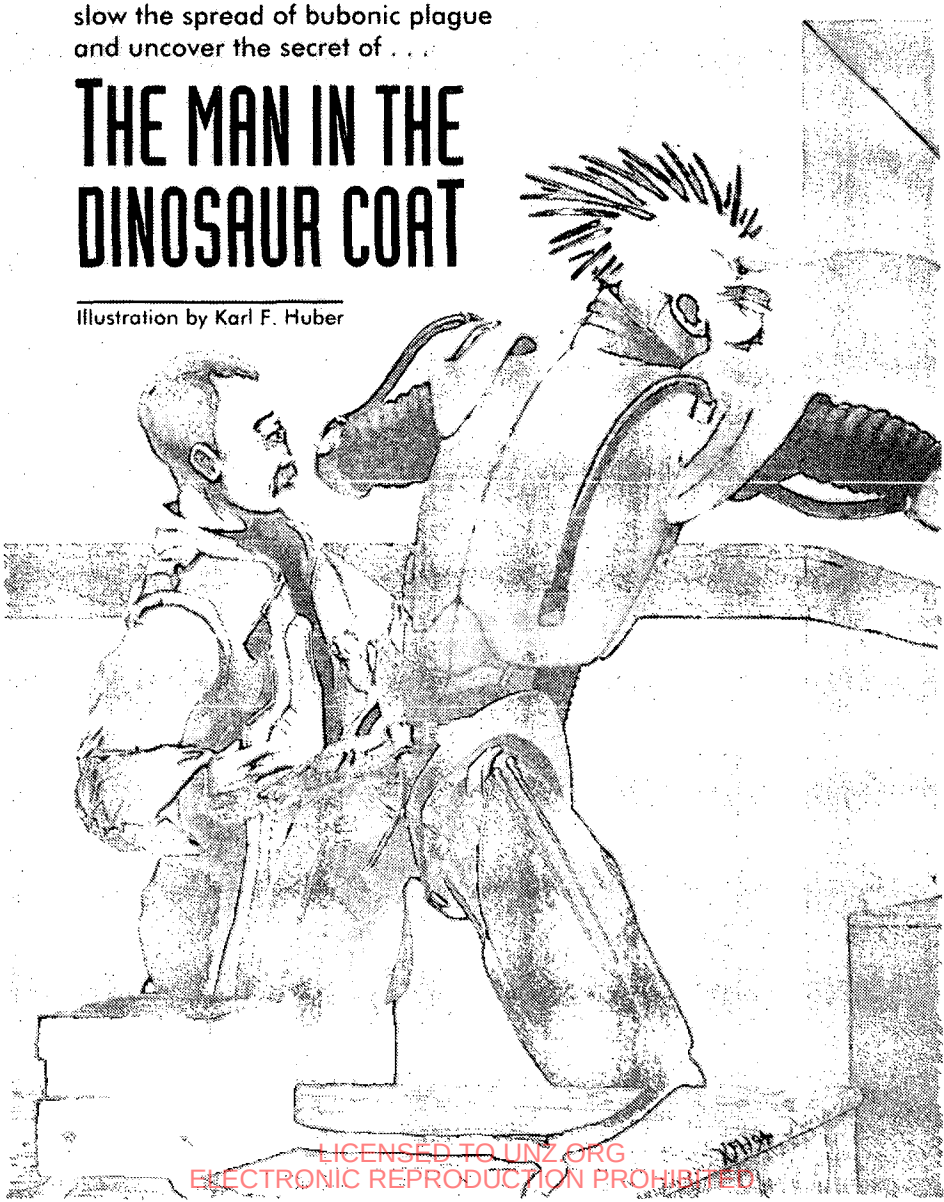
John Alfred Taylor

In a sleepy little snowbound town, a doctor and the sheriff must race against time to slow the spread of bubonic plague and uncover the secret of . . .

THE MAN IN THE DINOSAUR COAT

Illustration by Karl F. Huber



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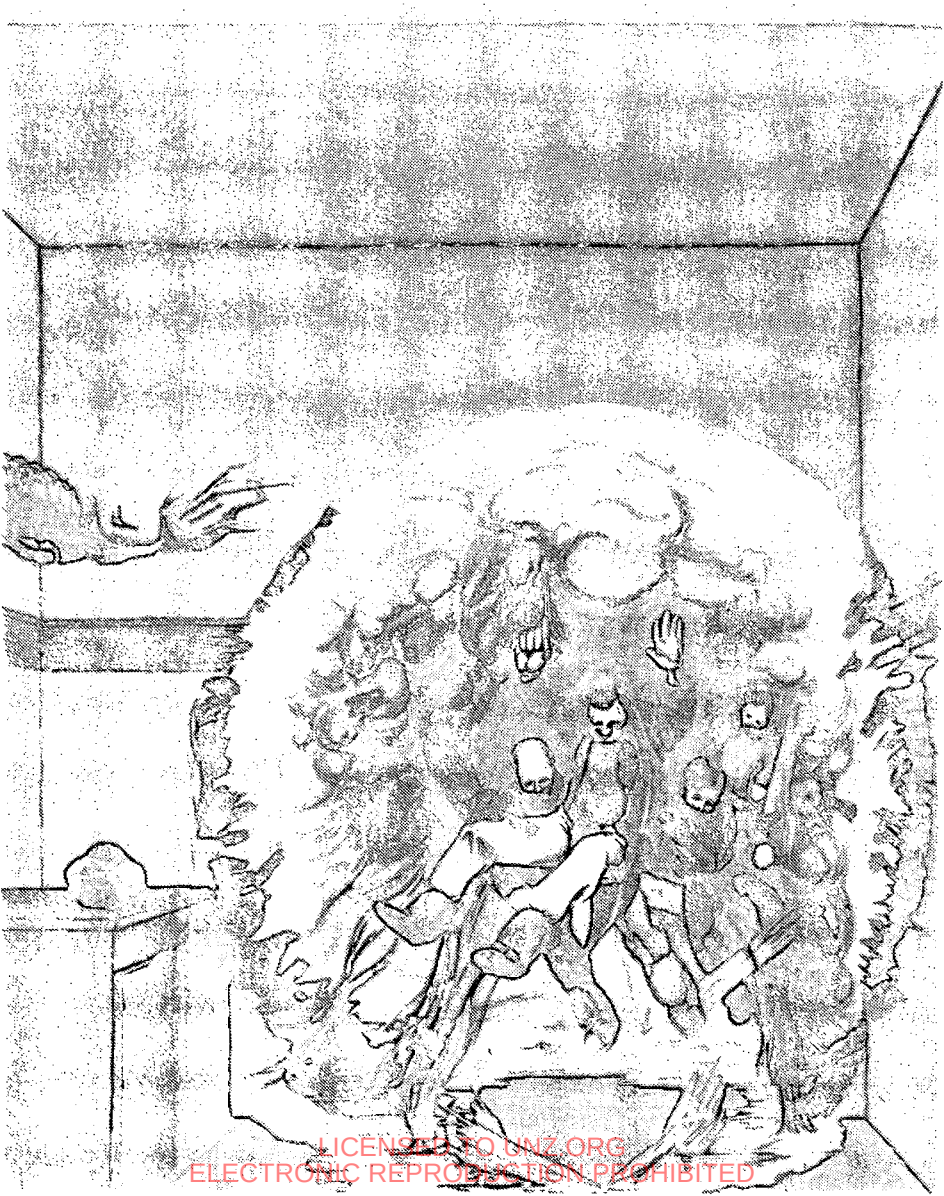

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"Keep as far away as you can," Doc Berner warned when he looked up from the body on the motel bed.

Jake Lucas backed against the door of the room, wishing the dead man's toy poodle would stop making that noise. As Sheriff he'd faced bikers on PCP, drunks the size of sumo wrestlers, even gentle wife-killers, but never a whining poodle. "Just what's wrong, Doc?"

"I'm afraid we have a rarity here. I'll try to reach the California Department of Health as soon as I can, and they'll report it to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta right away—"

"Just what kind of rarity?"

"Plague. Bubonic plague."

Jake shook his head in stubborn disbelief. "Black plague? Come on, Doc!"

Berner stared through his metal-rimmed glasses. "I'm not joking. Most likely I've already been exposed. But maybe you weren't, so do exactly what I tell you. I noticed a can of flea powder in the bathroom. Go dust yourself all over, then take this little dog out somewhere in the boonies and shoot it."

"Why?"

"Because fleas are the main vectors, and when one host dies, they go to the next."

"Never shot a poodle before," Jake said. "Though if they're like this one, it could become a habit."

Doc grinned sardonically. "Real poodles are different. Big and smart. This thing's a disguised rat."

In the bathroom, Jake took his shoes off, filled them with flea powder, dusted his socks, put more down the waistband of his chinos and the neck of his sweatshirt, rolled up his sleeves to do his forearms. Might give him a rash, but better red than dead.

"Bring that stuff out with you," Doc said from the next room. "Maybe I can use it."

Doc scattered flea powder all over, dumping it down his shirtfront and undershorts, pulling up his trousers to douse his calves, covering a wide strip on the rug next to the hall door before he helped Jake force the snapping toy poodle into a pillow case. "Don't let the guys from the ambulance come in the room. Tell 'em to bring a body bag up and drop it in the hall, then knock and get back out."

"I don't believe this."

"You better. Every year there are cases of human infection because of rodent hosts in the Southwest. On your way out check where this guy came from and call up to tell me."

The snow was falling even faster when Jake carried the captive dog

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out to his jacked-up Blazer with oversize tires. Better to see what the latest prediction was as soon as he was finished with the poodle. A job he wouldn't enjoy, in spite of what he'd said, but a necessary job, like the way he had to kill deer injured by cars when the game warden wasn't around.

Doc had said "That fits" cheerfully when Jake phoned up with the news that the late Stanley Sheldon was from El Centro. Jake was glad a man who might already be infected could sound so cheerful. Thanks to Doc he was probably safe, but he was still scared. What could they do if there were other cases, especially with the snow coming down this heavy and more on the way? Back in December snow had cut off the town for two days, and the storm that was coming already sounded worse than the one in December.

A few miles out of town Jake stopped and put on the brakes, but left his engine idling. Crunching up the slope under the pines, he put the pillowslip down in the snow. The dog whimpered and shook inside the bag. He knelt above it, immobilizing the poor little thing between his thighs, and made absolutely sure his pistol was centered on its skull before he fired.

The poodle jerked once. He left it in the snow and went back to the four-by-four.

Clean and quick, Jake thought as he holstered his revolver, deciding he'd let himself have a beer after he checked back with Doc. Only one. Not because it would be drinking on duty—it was hard sometimes to figure out when he was on duty and when not—but because it could be a long night. Maybe he could get Chuck to switch the bar TV to the weather channel.

Doc was agreeable. "Might meet you in the Pigpen myself, soon as I take a shower and dust myself again. Nothing to worry about here, the ambulance crew took Sheldon off as soon as I had him bagged."

Jake shook his head as he went out into the cold. He'd never understand where Doc was coming from, no matter how many times he tried to explain that moment as a medic in Vietnam when he stopped being afraid of death. Especially because Doc had re-entered medical school when he came back, and spent the years since fighting death toe to toe.

When he went through the inner door to the Pigpen the TV was already on the weather channel, with the regulars intent on the radar picture.

"Real shit coming, Jake," Chuck intoned from behind the bar.

"Real shit," old Schmied echoed in a voice no bigger than himself. He was perched on a barstool like a grasshopper on an entomologist's needle, face swamped under his enormous mustache.

Jake glanced at the big table past the far end of the bar as he got up on a stool, trying not to be obvious about it. All seven of the outsiders

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were there. "Budweiser," he told Chuck, then asked, "They been here long?" when Chuck came back.

"About three hours."

Jake couldn't figure these people at all. Four men and three women. They'd come in a big van two days ago, and taken over one end of the Sawyer House, insisting on having rooms next to each other. Except for the one with the snakeskin jacket, they all wore ski clothes, though they wouldn't be here if they were really interested in skiing, but twenty miles north at Eagle Mountain where there were trails and a chair lift.

They walked around town laughing or pointing like tourists, but tourists from where? Jake had persuaded Norma to let him see the motel register, and he'd copied down their foreign-looking names: Onos Rienefo, Sania Kleevin, and the like. Didn't sound like any names he knew. Maybe Doc could recognize the nationality.

And whenever they came in here, the thin dark one in the snakeskin jacket kept Chuck busy. "What's he doing tonight?" Jake whispered.

"Rum and rum drinks," Chuck said.

Jake shuddered. Since his arrival this Farnikos had been been trying everything in the bar except beer: Irish and Scotch whiskies, blends and single malts, bourbon and rye, asking for mixed drinks Chuck hardly knew the name of, almost as if he was going through an index, and never once seemed sick or particularly drunk. "Wait till he gets to tequila."

"He already did. This morning. Straight, in a margarita, in a sunrise, you name it, he tried it."

"*Any* of 'em ever get drunk?"

"Nope," said Chuck, "and they've all had enough to do it, one time or another."

"Weird."

Doc came in a few minutes later, shaking the snow off his parka, and ordered a double Scotch. He shuddered as he swallowed, put down the glass momentarily. "I needed that. Been on the phone reporting to the Department of Health. Not that they'd be able to do anything for us the way the storm's shaping up."

"Been thinking about that," Jake said. "Means we're on our own. Remember how it took the big plows two days to break through to us last time?"

Doc sipped his Scotch more slowly. "I remember. Just hope none of us are infected." He looked sideways down the bar as Chuck ambled toward the outsiders' table. "How long have they been in here this time?"

"Chuck says more than three hours. The guy's trying out rum and rum drinks now."

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"Amazing. Interesting if that was the reason why they were in town, just so he could try every drink there was."

"There are lots better stocked bars," Jake said.

Doc nodded. "Two at Eagle Mountain alone. So what are they doing in this town?"

"Been thinking about that myself," Jake said. "But can't think of a thing that makes sense. Far as I can tell they spend most of their time in the motel or here, they eat at Ma Chumley's. That's all they do."

"So why did they pick Sawyerville to do it in?"

"I'd sure like to know that too," Jake said.

Chuck came back behind the bar walking like a windup doll and picked out the Ronrico. "Is there anybody dead in the motel?" he whispered.

Doc shrugged. "Yeah, Chuck. There's a guest dead, no big deal. How'd you hear about it?"

"They were talking."

"Not to worry. People die of heart attacks all the time."

Once Chuck was down at the wet end of the bar, Doc let his true feelings show. "If they've been here for three hours—more than three hours now—"

"Yeah, right," Jake said. "If these weirdos have been here more than three hours, how did they learn Sheldon was dead? We might not know yet, except that Norma used her pass key when the poodle kept barking."

"Think I need another double," Doc muttered.

Jake wondered about having another beer himself, then decided against it, certain now it would be a long night indeed. When he patted Doc's shoulder, Doc reached around and back to cover Jake's hand with his own.

He went outside for a moment to check the weather. Now it was almost a blizzard, snow blowing everywhere, with the new stuff already more than a foot deep in the plowed part of Main Street.

"Blowing like hell," he told Doc when he came back in. "We're on our own for sure. You better tell me all you can about plague."

Doc looked around before he began. "Okay. It's caused by a bacillus we now call *Yersinia pestis*. Comes in three forms, bubonic, pneumonic, and septecemic. More people than you think survive it, but not if it's the septicemic—that's bad news."

After about a minute, Jake decided he might as well have a second beer after all, and Doc changed the subject till Chuck was far enough away again. "Incubation period's three to six days."

"So you won't know if you—"

"Not for awhile. Might give me medical student syndrome all over again—every time one learns about a new disease, one thinks one has it. Kind of galloping hypochondria."

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"And if you *are* infected?"

"Do the same thing for myself I'll do for anyone else."

"There's something you can do?"

"Course there is, Jake. Even if we're cut off and they can't get antiserum to us, we have antibiotics. Streptomycin helps–and for streptomycin-resistant strains there's the tetracyclines."

"Then we've got a chance?"

"Sure. First thing I'm going to do when I leave is see what I have at the office, and Ed Drabek can give us a count of what he has in the pharmacy."

"Great."

Doc grinned. "Oh, it's not going to be any fun."

Jake moved uncomfortably on his office cot, trying to get what rest he could. Doc would call him if anything came up, so he didn't need to stay awake. But he kept thinking of what he'd overheard.

On the way to the men's room just before he left the bar, Jake had passed by their table. Farnikos had some kind of notebook computer in front of him, and it looked like everybody else was waiting for him to finish some kind of calculation. That snakeskin jacket was something: big russet splotches on gray. Unless it was dyed, it had to come from a really big snake, maybe an anaconda.

When he came back out Farnikos had finished, and was making what seemed to be an announcement in a low voice. Afterward, the woman who was probably Sania Kleevin said "twenty" and Farnikos's fingers moved as he keyed the number in. One of the men said "fifteen," before Jake was past and couldn't hear what the others were saying.

But it was the one phrase he'd heard from Farnikos that worried him. Had he really heard "mortality against total population"?

He jerked awake when the phone rang.

"Yaah? Sheriff Lucas here—"

"Jake." It was Doc Berner. "My office is on fire."

"Where are you?"

"I'm calling from the Malcolms' next door."

"Fire company?"

"Already on the way."

"Me too," Jake said and hung up.

He put on his boots and gunbelt without turning on the light, zipped up his parka on the way out the door.

The snow was even thicker, haloed orange-pink uphill toward Doc's. He didn't even try to start the Blazer. He could make it faster on foot.

Halfway up the slope of North, Jake heard the siren of the pumper behind him. The yellow firetruck never caught up with him, though. He

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turned to see wheels spinning uselessly under the flashing lights till Bowden turned off the motor, and led the other volunteers uphill with what extinguishers they had.

Doc was standing in the snow with unbuckled boots, watching his house and office burn, parka on over his bathrobe, the Gladstone bag he'd been able to save sitting at his feet. "Don't know what happened," he told Jake as the firemen rushed in. "Woke up feeling real hot, and then there was a whoosh and the other end of the house went up like that. Barely had time to get out."

After a minute the firemen backed away from the flames and Bill came over to announce that it looked hopeless. "All we can do is keep it from spreading to the Malcolms'."

"Right," Doc said. "Guessed as much."

The two-way under Bill's long coat began squawking, and he brought it out and put it to his ear. "Another fire."

"Where?" Jake asked.

"Drabek's Pharmacy."

Doc looked at Jake until Bill was out of earshot, then whispered "It figures."

"How?"

"Don't know."

Jake was afraid he knew, after overhearing Farnikos announce "mortality against total population." Because Farnikos had been making book on bubonic plague.

But how had Farnikos known about the outbreak in advance?

Bill left two men standing on guard with extinguishers. The rest went back to the fire truck, and they backed slowly downhill through the snow.

Watching them go, Jake suspected the fire at Drabek's would be as unstoppable as the one here.

There was a second-fold up cot in Jake's office, so he invited Doc to bed down there for now. Doc insisted on contacting the Department of Health, but put down the phone after a moment, then picked it up and listened again. "No dial tone. Let's try somewhere else."

"You need something more to wear before you go out again. Your legs'll get mighty cold."

"Right," said Doc, "but what's here to wear?"

Jake looked around till he found a pair of long johns he'd dropped under the coat rack on the wall. "Sorry they're dirty."

"On a night like this, who cares?"

Doc put his bathrobe on again over the long johns, topped the robe with his parka, buckled his boots. Outside the whirling snow was still haloed pink by the twin fires.

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They pushed through the drifts past the closed Pigpen to the Sawyer House. The motel sign was out and Norma had gone to bed, but there was still the pay phone next to the entrance.

Jake gave Doc all the quarters he had, but Doc hung the handset back up. "No dial tone here either. Lines out must be down."

"Guess we'll have to wake up Gordon."

Doc snickered. "Gordon won't like that."

"Serves him right for having a ham rig."

Gordon didn't mind at all, because he was already awake. "What the hell's going on out there?"

"Oh, that's my house burning down. But that's not important right now, what's important is that we can't phone out."

"Something else that's more of an emergency?" Gordon asked as he led them down the hall.

"You might say that. I have to talk to the California Department of Health in Sacramento."

"I'll try one of the guys in the area," Gordon said. "He might be able to patch you through to them."

He grinned back at them, switched on his rig, looked up at the QSL cards from people who'd received him mounted on the wall above, turned on the loudspeaker.

Except for the irregular rhythm, the static was steady as a roll on a snare drum. "Jesus," he said, putting down his microphone, "worst I've ever heard. Maybe a solar storm. Looks like I'll have to key it. Haven't used Morse since I got my license."

Gordon started tapping out CQ SACRAMENTO. Finally he shook his head. "I'll try someone closer."

He tried again and again, but there was nothing but static. "Like there was a wall of noise around us," he said after he switched off his rig. "Come around in the morning and we'll try again."

"We'll do that. But one thing, Gordon—please don't mention this to anybody. Promise me?"

"That bad, Doc? I promise, but sure would like to know what's going on?"

"All right, you've promised and I can tell you. We don't want panic, which is why the news mustn't get out, but there's a guest at the Sawyer House dead of bubonic plague."

"Jesus," Gordon said.

"My office and Drabek's both burn, then the phones are out and we can't get through by radio," Doc said on the way back to Jake's office. "This is all too neat, like it was arranged. And I have a pretty good idea of who did the arranging."

Jake nodded. "Me too."

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"What are you going to do about it?"

Jake spread his gloved hands out helplessly. "Nothing I can do. There's nothing at all I can arrest those outsiders for, nothing that could be considered 'probable cause.' "

"Afraid you're right," Doc murmured. "But there's one ray of hope—"

"Such as?"

"The minimum incubation period's three days. The storm will be over and the snowplows through by the time we know anybody else is infected. We'll have all the anti-serum and antibiotics we need."

"Hope so," Jake said, looking at the sky. The wind had dropped, but the snow was still coming down thick and white as feathers. He remembered how bemused he'd been as a child when somebody had told him that a pound of feathers weighed as much as a pound of lead. Looking up at the huge flakes, he knew that it was true.

And Sheldon had checked in day before yesterday, complaining to Norma about being too tired to go on to Eagle Mountain. Now Sheldon was sleeping sound as a person could.

Next morning Doc borrowed one of Jake's legal pads, and began lining out a plan. He made Jake read it over when he was finished. "Ask me about anything that isn't clear, because if I'm infected, you're head honcho."

"What if we're both infected?"

Doc grimaced. "Bite your tongue."

"It's too damn clear," Jake said. "What it means is there's not much we can do for anybody who's infected."

"Right. Not much better than the fourteenth century. Except we know the vector. So we can make sure not only that each case is isolated, but that the people taking care of them won't be at risk."

"What's this proclamation at the end?"

"We can't keep this quiet for long. The proclamation's for when the news does get out—Can you print it out with big letters?"

"Sure can." Jake tried to make a joke out of it. "My computer's even got a font that looks like Gothic lettering or whatever you call it. Think that would fit?"

Doc grinned. "Next you'll want a guy going around with a cart yelling 'Bring out the dead.' "

"Hope not."

"Yeah," Doc sighed.

One good thing about Doc's plan was that it gave Jake something to do so he wouldn't just sit around stewing. He hated to wait, though a career in law enforcement meant he'd had to learn how. The girl in the Superette checkout didn't say anything except "Have a nice day"

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when he paid for every can of flea powder in the store—though she did stare—but Kane of Kane's Hardware was more direct. "You got a dog, Jake?"

"Just got one."

"Must be big as an elephant."

"Want to be prepared," Jake said.

"Oh sure."

The snow slacked off for awhile, then came down swirling thick as ever.

That evening they went to the Pigpen to keep watch on the outsiders. Jake walked ahead to break trail, because all the paths that had been shoveled in the daytime were already filling up. Halfway to the bar he stopped and turned. "Something I have to tell you, Doc."

"Yes?"

Alone in the falling snow they faced each other. "I think these people are making bets on the plague," Jake whispered, and told Doc what he'd overheard.

"You're sure?"

"How can I be sure of something like that? But I can't think of any other explanation, because the man in the snakeskin coat did say 'mortality against total population,' and afterward the others were laying numbers on him. Numbers he was entering on his notebook computer."

"See your point," Doc said, "but how would they have known about Sheldon being sick in advance?"

"Beats me."

When they went in the bar, Farnikos and two of the other men were at the table in the back.

"What's he trying this time?" Jake asked when Chuck brought Doc Berner's double and Jake's beer.

"Schnapps. He started with blackberry, went on to peach, and now he's on watermelon."

"Goddamn," Jake said, "there's nowhere left to go after that. Lower than whale shit."

Chuck laughed. "Want to bet? There's still root beer schnapps and—I hope you're ready for this, Jake, hope you're really ready—something called bubble gum schnapps."

Jake groaned and made the Mr. Yuck face.

The other outsiders came in a few minutes later. There was something subtly odd about the way they moved, but Jake couldn't pin it down. Their voices rose as they joined the three at the table, and for a moment he almost captured the thought.

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The woman named Sania Kleevin saw him watching them as she sat down, and smiled back at him across a great distance.

But what kind of distance?

The question crystalized the intuition he was trying to grasp: Outsiders. Outsiders who moved as if they were actors wearing costumes, people at a masked ball. They must have come from some place very far away, and probably belonged to what used to be called the jet set.

"Doc," he said, "have you ever listened to those people talk?"

"Can't say I have."

"I heard them once in Chumley's, and here last night when Farnikos was taking bets. They talk like foreigners."

"They have an accent?"

"Just the opposite. They don't have any accent at all. Their English is too perfect, like every sentence was turned out on a lathe."

"Does sound like foreigners," Doc said, far away himself after his second slug of Scotch.

"And you should see their names."

When Jake looked at the table again, the Kleevin woman was smiling at him with the same distant mocking smile, like a riddle he had to solve.

Before they went to bed back at the office, Jake showed Doc the names he'd copied from the motel register.

THALIS SARANTAN
RENDAN FARNIKOS
ONOS RIENEFO
SANIA KLEEVIN
PRODUS ORNIKE
FLADI FRABIN
KLOPAS MURIKAS.

"See—their names all read like they're from somewhere else," Jake said. "Any idea where?"

Doc shook his head. "Not a clue. Some of the names sound a little like French or Italian or Greek, but 'Fladi' makes me think of Norwegian or Slavic. What I really mean is I can't even venture a guess."

Next morning was overcast, but not snowing. Maybe Doc was right and they'd scrape through, though when they went out and headed for Ma Chumley's the street was deep in drifts. If any more snow fell everybody in town would end up tunneling instead of shoveling.

Chumley's was warm and close, full of tobacco smoke and the thick greasy smell of bacon and eggs. When Ma approached their booth Jake ordered scrambled eggs and sausage and hash browns, and Doc seconded his order.

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"What's up, Doc? You're always giving me lectures on cutting down the cholesterol—"

"*What's up, Doc?* At least you don't do a Bugs Bunny imitation like some who've asked me that. Think of it as the possibly condemned man eating a hearty meal. And I can always go back to my diet if I'm not infected."

"Got a point," Jake said.

Jake had just taken a bite of eggs when Bill Bowden came in and made a beeline for the booth. He leaned closer and said "Got a weird story from Tim White about what he saw just before the fire at Drabek's."

"Tim?" Jake grunted with his mouth full.

"Yeah. But I don't want to talk about it here. And anyway you ought to hear it from the horse's mouth. I'll bring Tim over to your office in about an hour."

Jake nodded, but after Bill left they looked doubtfully at each other. Tim did room across the street from Drabek's, but still—

"Wonder if what he saw was at the bottom of a bottle," Doc said.

"We'll have to make our own judgment on that when we hear his story."

"I wasn't drunk," Tim said. "Anyway, not that drunk. And then I was outside watching Bill and the guys fighting the fire, so I remember just what happened. I mean I didn't have another drink for an hour."

Jake raised his hand apologetically. "Okay, Tim. Just had to ask. So tell me what happened again."

"This what you call an interrogation?"

"Not in the sense we think you're a crook. Just want to get the details absolutely clear in my head."

"Already told Bill here twice and you once."

"I know, Tim, but I want to be sure."

"All right. Like I said I was sitting in the dark in my room when there was this flash of light. Not like what I'm used to—Drabek leaves one fluorescent on all night—I mean he did leave one on before— But this was blue-white, really fierce. And when I went to the window I saw this blue-white thing like a bubble through the plate glass across the street. It got brighter and dimmer and brighter in a sort of rhythm—"

"Pulsed?" Doc asked.

"Yeah, that's it. It pulsed, and each time it got brighter and bigger, till I couldn't look straight at it. Then the plate glass blew out and everything caught fire."

"Interesting," Jake said.

"You believe me, don't you?"

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"Yes I do, Tim. Funny things have been happening, things I can't talk about now, but this fits some way. Thanks for letting us know about it."

After Bill and Tim were gone Doc said, "Bet anything I'd have seen a blue-white pulse too if I'd been awake and anywhere near my office. But all I did was feel the heat."

"No arsonist I know of uses anything like that. Accelerants like gasoline or kerosene maybe—"

Doc nodded. "So what are we up against, Jake?"

"God damn if I know."

It was snowing again when Jake went out. The Blazer was already walled in by snow, so he went around town on foot, dropping in on old Mullins and his wife to make sure they were all right, checking whether any roofs had accumulated dangerous levels of snow, seeing how much food was left on the shelves at the Superette—the bread was almost gone.

One thing Jake didn't want to think about was power: the phones were already out, but if the power lines went down—

Things were bad enough already.

He went back to the office and ran twenty copies of Doc's proclamation off on the dot-matrix printer. Better be prepared in case the power did go off.

"What do you think this Farnikos person will be drinking tonight?" Doc asked on the way to the Pigpen.

"Can't even imagine," Jake said. "Can't think what's left after last night."

"He certainly did plumb the depths."

All the outsiders were already at the back table.

"Farnikos? He's filling in the cracks," Chuck said in answer to Doc's first question. "Saki, ouzo so far. And he's still got Japanese plum wine and Boone's Farm and stuff like that to go."

"My usual double insanity," Doc ordered. "It may numb me to the point where I can keep my supper down."

"Beer for me," Jake said, then murmured: "How do you think Farnikos does that, Doc? And the others—they don't seem to get drunk either."

"Don't know. There's a liver enzyme that helps detoxify alcohol, but that can only help so far." He laughed. "Maybe they take some magical pill."

"Maybe they do," Jake said.

Doc looked at him, suddenly serious. "Interesting thought." Chuck handed him his double. Doc looked back down at his drink, took a slug, and turned back to Jake. "Which somehow leads to another question—"

"Like what?"

Doc held his hand up in warning, eyes closed. "Not too clear yet." After

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a moment he nodded and looked back up. "You've said they must be foreigners. And I agree, even if their names don't seem to be those of any nationality I know. But here's Farnikos trying out drinks from all over the world—all over—as if they're all equally foreign. So where do they come from?"

"From mighty far away," Jake said. "That Kleevin woman saw me watching her last night and she smiled and looked back as if I was at the other end of a microscope. Or maybe a telescope."

"Aliens, Jake? In spite of all the flying saucer stories, the distances are too great. And the chance of an extraterrestrial intelligence being even roughly humanoid is next to nothing."

"Oh, they're human all right. But I wonder if they really think we are."

"Your imagination's on overdrive."

"That was a mighty superior smile she gave me."

"Maybe she thought you were trying to pick her up."

"You didn't see her expression," Jake said. "I don't think the idea could even occur to her."

"Not very flattering."

Jake shrugged just as Chuck came back to announce "His next drink is Bailey's Irish Cream" in a melodramatic whisper.

"Irish Cream after saki and ouzo?" Doc rolled his eyes sickly upward.

A half hour later Jake felt like leaning over and beating his head on the bar. There was nothing they could do but wait, nothing he could do but order a second beer, and he'd already decided against that.

Tomorrow or the day after that or the day after someone would turn feverish and the lymph glands in his neck and groin and armpit would begin to swell. There was always the chance nobody else was infected, but Jake didn't think so. Farnikos and the others were too sure. Otherwise they wouldn't be here betting on the plague.

But how could they possibly have known?

He had to move or go nuts. For want of anything better to do, he decided to go to the men's room because the last time he'd walked past he'd overheard Farnikos calling for those bets on mortality against population.

This time, though, all he overheard was Sania Kleevin sampling Farnikos's plum wine. She made a face, and said, "more than a little darvish." Was *darvish* slang of some kind, or was it a word from the language of her mysterious homeland?

He was luckier on the way back. Farnikos opened his notebook computer at just the right moment, and Jake realized it wasn't like any computer he knew about. The whole inside was one seamless screen, with no hinges or join, and what he'd assumed were keys when he'd seen

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Farnikos taking bets were really just spots on the screen. He'd heard about touch-screens before, even used one once in the San Francisco Exploratorium when he accompanied a friend taking his kids there, but he'd never heard of glass you could fold, glass that was as flexible as rubber.

Jake told Doc about it on the way to the office. The snow had slackened some but was still falling steadily.

"I wouldn't believe it if you hadn't seen it," Doc said. "There's no way you could fold glass, and any transparent plastic I know would show a line where it was folded. And break sooner or later. Unless it's the latest Japanese technology, which I find more than doubtful."

Next morning Jake walked down to Keegan's Service and Garage to get extra gasoline for his Coleman stove and lanterns in case the power went out.

He wasn't surprised to see Keegan's closed; after all, who was driving now? He walked up the side street, put down the empty gas cans at the door, but when he knocked there was no answer. He waited and knocked again, finally turned the knob—it wasn't locked—and eased the door open.

"Mike," he yelled, "Mike."

Finally he thought he heard a weak voice.

"I'll be back with Doc," he shouted.

Doc's list of the four people he considered more likely to show the symptoms first included himself, Norma, Manuela the housekeeper who helped Norma with the motel, and Jake ("though maybe I kept you far enough away") but he'd forgotten Mike, though Keegan's could be the first place in town a traveler would stop.

He burst into the office and Doc jerked awake in his chair. "Mike Keegan may have it!" Jake gasped, out of breath from trying to run through the drifts.

"Damn, should have thought of Mike!" Doc said, rushing to put on his boots and parka. "Grab the flea powder." Jake picked up the canvas bag as Doc lifted his Gladstone. He felt a little silly arming himself with flea powder, though right now it was more useful than the gun at his hip.

"How's that for quick response?" Doc said when they were outside. "From sleep to sixty in less than a minute."

"Pretty good," Jake said. "If you had wheels you'd be an ambulance."

"With this snow, wheels wouldn't do me any good," Doc laughed, and then they were hurrying too much to talk.

"You stay back," Doc told Jake once they were in the dimness of Keegan's front hall. "But give me a couple cans of that, and dump some more on your clothes."

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Jake dusted himself thoroughly before going any further, then followed. He could hear Keegan's painful wheezing thirty feet away.

Even though Doc had switched on every light in the bedroom, Jake couldn't see much but Doc's back over the bed and couldn't hear what Doc was saying. The worn rug between was pale with swaths of flea powder.

Doc murmured one last thing, then came halfway across the room, motioning Jake to keep his distance. "Septicemic," he whispered. "Mike says Sheldon came in to buy a Coke and a candy bar after he gassed up."

Jake whispered too: "Does he have any chance?"

"Probably not. Septicemic's bad as you can get."

"So what can we do for him?"

"Not much. I'll clean him up, make sure there's water in his reach, check back every hour or two. You might as well not stick around here."

"Tell Mike I need the key to the pump." Jake hoped he didn't sound too callous, but he needed that gas.

Doc went back to the bed, consulted with Keegan and searched his trouser pocket, then returned to throw the key. Jake caught it and said "Thank Mike for me."

As he picked up the empty cans outside and trudged downhill Jake wondered which of them would be next. One kind of waiting was over, the other just begun.

Doc came in three-quarters of an hour later. "Dusted myself with flea powder, showered, and dusted again," he announced. "Probably safe for human company."

"Where'd you shower?"

"The late Mr. Sheldon's room."

Jake whistled. "Doc, you're really something."

"It seemed reasonable at the time. Also gave me a chance to check up on Norma."

"How about Manuela?"

"Norma told her not to come to work today."

"Then one of us better go round and see how *she* is soon."

"Oh, this is going to be fun," Doc said. "Real fun, with each of us going round to see if the next one's still standing up."

"What about Mike?"

"Barely breathing. I would have been tempted to put him out of his misery if I had any morphine left. But maybe it's lucky I haven't. Mike might scrape through yet, though his chances are about as slim as the little end of nothing."

"Time to put up your proclamation, Doc?"

"Definitely."

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So for the next half hour Jake went around town with a roll of tape and the stack of proclamations, putting copies up wherever they would be protected from the weather; he put up two inside the window of the Superette, one on the inner door of the Pigpen, let himself into Keegan's to tape one to the inside of the glass door, even left one on the plywood covering the windows of what had been the Sew and Sew fabric and pattern store.

He ended his rounds at Manuela Lopez's door. She looked a bit surprised to see him there. "Hi Jake— What's happenin'?"

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine, sheriff. Why?"

"Let me in. And I want you to sit down before I tell you."

"Hey man," she said, smiling with all her wrinkles to show she was making a joke as she widened the door, "This some new way to make a pass?" But her smile stopped before she sat down. "Bad news, hah?"

"Bad. Remember Sheldon?"

"He died."

"Of a very dangerous disease. And you, me, Doc and Norma are the first ones he might have passed it on to. This thing of Doc's explains it better than I can."

She winced, but when he handed her the copy of the proclamation he'd saved for her, her first remark was "This another of those Anglo literacy tests?"

Jake grinned. "You got an attitude, Manuela."

She read slowly, occasionally saying the words to herself, gasped once or twice, then looked up, black eyes shrewd as a sparrow's. "First Doc, you, me and Norma, huh?"

"Doc's best guess."

"And I hear Doc's already staying with you. At the office."

"Doc doesn't have a home, and I don't have time for home."

"So why don't I move into the motel? There's no guests except those seven at the other end. That way the four of us are close together, each of us can check how the others are feeling."

"Good thought, real good. I'll wait while you pack what you need. You and Doc might carry this dumb sheriff through."

Manuela chuckled at what she thought was flattery. But Jake wasn't so sure it was; he felt mighty inadequate to the situation.

"One thing," Jake said as they made their way to the Sawyer House. "Just in case you or Norma are carriers, you two stay away from the outsiders. They can change their own sheets."

Manuela grinned and shook her head. "They already do. They told us to stay out of their rooms and not to worry about the beds the first

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day. Funny thing though, Sheriff Jake—they haven't asked for any new sheets or pillowcases."

"So you haven't seen the rooms since they moved in?"

"No."

Jake frowned. Exactly what did the seven have to hide?

Maybe if they were all in the Pigpen at once he could slide out, borrow Norma's passkey and see what their secret was.

"Well, well," Doc said when he told him the situation and his plan. "So Norma and Manuela haven't seen those rooms since the strangers moved in. Interesting. If you borrowed the key in advance to make things quicker, went back toward the rest rooms, then slipped into the alley, carefully avoiding the garbage cans—who knows all you might find out?"

Not that either of them had much time to think about the night. People who had read the proclamation dropped in all day for assurance and instruction: Doc was forced to expand on the basics of the poster, Jake had to organize a network where everyone would check on the neighbors on either side. Finally they handed out all but the last few cans of flea powder, to the point where Doc laughed and said: "Here we are—absolutely nuts—crazy to give this stuff out free when it could be worth its weight in gold."

Both were tense as they lurched through the drifts and falling snow toward the bar, because Jake had Norma's passkey ready in his pocket.

The outsiders were all at their table. "What's Farnikos drinking tonight?"

"Beer," Chuck said. "Draft so far."

Doc looked solemn after Chuck went for their orders. "Means he'll be going to the men's room now and then. Might make it difficult for you to get away with your act."

"No problem. I'll wait to go till he's just come back from there."

Doc grinned and nodded.

It was a long wait. After Farnikos finished his fourth beer Jake began to wonder if the outsider had a bladder like an accordion, but finally Farnikos stood up. When he came back Jake slowly counted to sixty before rising. He was past the swinging door and restrooms in a second, and once out left a block behind to keep the firedoor to the alley open just a crack.

The drifts were so deep in the alley there was no sign of the garbage cans Doc had told him to avoid. It was a struggle to reach the street—there was one moment when Jake had to crawl up and over like a seal.

There was only one light on in the lobby when he went in and nobody at the desk; Norma was asleep in the room behind the lobby. He went

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down the hall to the right, watching for the numbers on the list Norma had given him. They were on the far end—the strangers sure liked their privacy.

Room 34 was Ornike's room. The key slid in smoothly, the lock turned, the door gave easily for the first half-inch. Then it pushed back, as if he was pushing against a membrane that could only be stretched so far. He shoved with his full weight before he gave up. For some reason it made Jake think of the way he'd never been able to force the north poles of two magnets together when he was a boy. He relocked the door so Ornike wouldn't suspect anything, and tried Room 36 with the same disappointing result: the momentary yielding, then the same total resistance again.

Jake tried the other five doors with no better luck, then hurried back down the hall. In an earlier century he might have imagined each door guarded by a silent demon, whose only duty was to heave back except when he heard the magic word.

Getting back into the alley behind the Pigpen was every bit as hard as getting out, and once he was inside Jake spent a whole minute brushing snow off his jeans and parka before he went any further.

"Any luck?" Doc whispered.

Jake pulled himself onto the bar stool, gestured to Chuck. "No. Tell you more about it when we're alone."

When he looked at the table in the rear Farnikos and Sania Kleevin were grinning at him as if they knew everything that had happened.

Jake jerked awake. Somebody outside was knocking, really hammering away. He rolled out of his cot, and hit the light, looked at his watch. 6:13.

Doc blinked up at him. "What's that?"

"Somebody at the door."

The somebody was Manuela. "Norma's got the sickness bad."

"Plague's never good," Doc said. They'd been sleeping in their underwear, so could dress immediately and follow Manuela into the gale. "Jesus," Doc yelled, "it's even colder!"

"That's the wind chill," Jake yelled back.

The warmth inside the lobby of the Sawyer House was little comfort, acid with bile, thick with the yeasty stink of old sweat.

Jake stayed in the lobby—Manuela had already mentioned cleaning up after Norma, and anyway sick people were Doc's job—until he heard Norma groan about how the light made her head hurt. Then he felt ashamed of himself and went into the back room.

Even with Doc's electronic thermometer like a plastic cigar in her mouth, Norma gave Jake a feeble grin and tried to lift her hand in greeting.

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"You hang in there," he said. She nodded.

When the thermometer pinged Doc drew it out of her mouth, shucked the throwaway sheath, and looked at the readout. "Your temperature's only 101, so listen to Jake. Because hang in there's the best advice I can give too."

"Long as I can," she wheezed.

"That'll be thirty more years."

"That's bull, Doc."

"No, it's not, Norma. Lots of people have survived plague. I won't kid you, won't say you aren't at risk. But you don't seem to be too bad, considering. Lymph glands hardly swollen, not much fever."

"You're kidding."

"No. Plague's funny. Some people die in hours, some have it much worse than you and survive, some come through like it was the equivalent of a mild case of flu. Now we have to get things organized. Manuela and you can have half the remaining flea powder—we saved two cans for each of you and two for Jake and me."

Jake put down the canvas bag and dipped in to pass the flea powder to Manuela, who lined them out on top of the TV cart beside the set.

"Now you make sure you've got plenty of water, and get something to eat when you think you can hold it down. There's food enough?"

"Sure, Doc," Manuela said. "There's stuff in the little fridge there and we got canned soup and a hot plate."

"Good. And Jake and I will check back every hour."

Back in the wind and snow, Jake yelled "Has Norma really got a chance?"

"She has a good chance. People *do* have differential resistance: I'd show you the literature if all my references hadn't gone up in smoke. Though I'd feel much more comfortable if we still had antibiotics."

"So all we can do is worry about Norma and wait to see which one of us gets it next?"

"I'm afraid that's all," said Doc. "Though somebody else might come down with it before we do."

Jake laughed like a hurt dog's yelp. "That really cheers me up."

Doc grinned back. "Whatever turns you on, Jake."

Back in the office, Jake put the last two cans of flea powder in the deep side drawer of his desk, and threw the canvas tote on the floor. "Retiring this bag, Doc. At least until we get something else to hand out."

"That'll be a while."

"Yeah," Jake acknowledged. "The plows from Eagle Mountain can't even start till the snow stops. And what irritates me is that I can't blame anybody there, because if I was them I'd wait too."

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Doc put his parka back on. "Better go check on Mike."

"Why not wait till light?"

"Mike might not. He was pretty near the edge at three. I should have seen him sooner, but I needed *some* sleep."

Fifteen minutes later Doc returned. "I think Mike's going soon. So you're going to have to keep track of Norma and the town by yourself. Nobody should have to die alone."

"He's that bad?"

"That bad."

Jake sighed. "It's not fair. Nobody should have to die alone. But I'll come running anyway if I need help."

"Of course," Doc said.

Alone, Jake slumped in his chair, trying not to get the shakes at the recurrent thought of Doc getting sick and leaving him alone—

It would be less frightening to have the plague himself. Except of course there'd be the chance he might die. But if he was sick he wouldn't have the responsibility for the whole town, responsible in spite of his medical ignorance. Doc had told him all he could, everything Jake could understand, but it wasn't enough.

Unable to sit still, he went to the window and looked at the sky. Barely snowing now. Maybe later he and Doc might go see if Gordon could get through with his ham rig. Though that depended on whether Doc could leave Mike.

Anything to wipe those sneering grins off Farnikos and Sania Kleevin's faces.

When he did his rounds Manuela announced that Norma was no better and no worse, old Mullins and his wife assured him they had all they needed, but the Superette was out of milk and the sky still full of snow.

Just after noon Bill Bowden came in looking grim and holding a folded paper. "A message from Doc here—he yelled at me from Mike's as I went by, then dropped it on the stoop and backed off when I came closer. Think Doc's got it?"

"Have to read it before I can say," Jake said, though he knew already.

The page was ripped from a ledger:

JAKE,

MY TEMPERATURE 100, LYMPH GLANDS SWOLLEN AND TENDER WHEN I PALPATE. NOW IT'S UP TO YOU.

DOC

PS: WILL HELP WHILE I CAN.

Jake nodded up at Bowden. "Doc's got it for sure. Can you mind the store here while I go talk to him?"

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"Will do."

Just what he'd been afraid of, he told himself crunching down the street. Though Bowden's bringing the news gave him a hint of one step more to take.

Poor Bill.

Doc and Jake talked at a distance of ten feet, with Jake just inside the door and Doc holding himself upright in the dark hall.

"Right now think I've got a good chance," Doc said. "Even if I feel like shit. Good as Norma's anyway."

"What about Mike?"

Doc shook his head. "Mike's in a coma, and I don't think he'll wake up."

"Goddamn!" Jake frowned at the hall rug for a moment before continuing. "You got food here, Doc?"

"Plenty. Mike's pantry is big on canned soup, pork and beans, canned juices."

"Okay," Jake said. "Then we'll keep doing what we planned before. But one more thing: if I get sick I pass the job on to Bill Bowden. I'll show him the plan we drew up right now, and if he has any questions he can come up here."

"Right," Doc said, and then staggered and slid slowly down the wall on one side. Jake lunged forward as Doc held up a warning hand. "I can take care of myself, but whoever comes up next—" he lowered his voice to a whisper—"should bring a body bag."

"Mike's *that* bad?" Jake whispered in reply.

"I already said so," Doc hissed.

Bill as good as turned green when Jake explained he wanted him to take over if Jake got sick. "That's a lot of responsibility."

"How do you think it feels to me right now? But there's got to be somebody in charge."

Bowden sighed. "Okay. You got me. Now what?"

"Here's Doc's plan. Read it through, and see if it makes sense. He got more than a little input from me, and we'll appreciate any suggestions you've got. And if you need more details on plague than Doc put down, go get them from the horse's mouth."

Bill read the pages of the legal pad carefully, thoughtfully. "Looks good to me. Though there's one resource you folks forgot."

"What's that?"

"Snowmobiles."

"Of course," Jake said, slapping himself on the forehead in disgust. "How many people around town have them?"

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"I've got one. Then there's Engelmann and Grover—five or six altogether. Won't get us through to Eagle Mountain, I'm afraid, but they'll give us some mobility beyond the middle of town."

"And we really might need mobility," Jake agreed. "Who knows how many people have been exposed to plague. Anything else?"

"Naw. Except for the snowmobiles, you folks seem to have thought of everything. Though I think I will amble up to ask Doc more about plague."

"In that case, let me get you a body bag to take along."

"Doc's that sick?"

"No, but Mike is. Doc says he's going to need one soon. You can carry it under your coat so nobody panics."

"Jesus! What next?"

"You can say that again, Bill. What is fucking next?"

What next was Bowden coming back with a note from Doc:

WONDER WHAT FARNIKOS WILL BE DRINKING TONIGHT. INFORMATION NOT ESSENTIAL IN ANY WAY. JUST CURIOUS. NEED ALL THE LAUGHS I CAN GET.

Even though he wasn't in the mood, Jake was in the Pigpen that night, because Doc did need every laugh he could get.

"Ale and stout and foreign beers," Chuck said when Jake asked what Farnikos was trying. "Labbatt's and Guinness and Beck's and Heinekens. What we have of them."

"What then?"

Chuck snickered. "Then it's tough titty for Farnikos. Because that's the absolute end of what the bar's got. Unless he wants a whole 'nother go round."

Jake stared down the bar at the seven outsiders, wishing there was such a thing as the evil eye or that he had lasers for pupils, with Bowden nursing a bottle of Perrier on the next bar stool. If only he could tell Bill what else was going on—

When Farnikos and Sania Kleevin smiled back Jake almost bit off the lip of his beer glass.

When Jake and Bill went back to the office, Hugh Grover was waiting on the bench outside under the one bare bulb, watching the snow come down. Grover didn't look at all cold inside his snowmobile suit and insulated boots.

Speak of the devil. Bill had reminded him of snowmobiles just two hours ago, and here one was in front of the door.

"Something I should know?" Jake asked.

"Think so," Grover said. "Just gonna come into town when Price

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walked down from uphill and said he'd heard somebody talking further up, the same words over and over it sounded like."

"Think it's somebody we don't know about, some poor guy from outside?"

"Probably," Grover said. "There ain't nobody up our hill beyond for miles, nobody who'd be dumb enough to try walking in."

"Then I guess we better go look for him."

Grover came down the steps and straddled his vehicle. "Hop on and hold on. We'll watch for Price's light. He said he was going to snowshoe up and look for the guy."

He started the snowmobile engine as Jake sat down behind him and grabbed his waist. "I'll get mine and follow you up," Bowden yelled. "You might need more help."

They were following Grover's inbound tracks, only a couple of miles out of town, when Bill caught up. Flying along over the drifts with trees on either side, everything flashing up suddenly in the glare of the headlamps, Jake could see no sign of the buried road except the spacing of the trees.

Just past Price's cabin they saw his light swinging in the distance, and slowed to a stop beside him and the dark form in the snow. "He out?" asked Grover. "Thought you said he was talking—"

Dismounting from the snowmobile Jake marveled at the length and thinness of the man Price was kneeling over.

"Some kind of recording. Switched off when I came within ten feet. The guy was face down, so I turned him rightside up."

"Oh oh, " Bill said. "Frostbite."

"No risk of frostbite," said a voice Jake had never heard before, but whose accent, or more exactly, lack of accent he recognized. "I was protected." Jake stared down at the man they'd come to rescue; a thin film was pulling away from his face, breaking into threads thin as spiderweb and crawling up the cheeks into what appeared to be a knit watch cap as dark as his coat.

"What month is this?" asked the lean old man, and Jake suddenly realized where Farnikos and the other outsiders had come from.

"January," Jake said. "So just what year are you from?"

"Clever of you to guess. By your reckoning 2853."

"And you've come back to laugh at us too?"

"Not at all. From your manner I gather that you represent legality and order. I too. Some of my contemporaries here have violated the code—"

"I suppose arson's still against the law in your time?"

"Among other things. More important, they've broken their Noninterference Bonds."

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"Maybe more important to you."

"Please help me up. Because I prefer to quibble standing." Jake shrugged, wondering what the old goat would be like when he was on his feet if he gave orders while flat on his back. He squatted by one shoulder while Price stooped at the other side.

Jake slid his hand below the time traveler's arm: it felt like he was wearing armor under the long black overcoat. Price nodded to Jake, they heaved the old man up, and the armor moved and contracted against Jake's palm and forearm as the stranger stood to tower over them.

Noticing Jake's recoil, the lean man grinned down at him. If that was supposed to be reassuring, Jake preferred something like a Great White Shark turning his direction: the sunken eyes were a terrifying solid yellow—no pupil, iris or white. "Don't let my powered exoskeleton frighten you. I need one because I come from the Moon—the reason I lost my balance and fell in the snow when I landed. But what day is it? Am I anywhere near Sawyerville, California?"

"It's the twelfth, and you're only a few miles out of town."

The outsider gave a pleased chirp. "Vector only a few microns off. And I've met a legality and order person already. Let us go face these malefactors. I will take them out of your hair—if that is the correct idiom."

"No," Jake said. "It's not going to be that easy for you, because not only do three of us already have plague, but your people burned all medical supplies that might have helped, and then cut us off from outside help."

"The very things that alerted us. Some energies they used are foreign to this time."

"So why are these Noninterference Bonds so sacred?"

"Interfering with the past is forbidden."

"And why did they want to?"

"To change the odds."

Jake ground his teeth, resisting an impulse to tip the time-traveler down into the snow again. "So it's all right to come back and bet on which people die if you don't change the odds? And how many people were supposed to die before Farnikos and friends meddled?"

"Two deaths are recorded."

"That's two too many. And there are three sick, and who knows how many more to come."

"I am a Transtemporal Adjuster, not a healer. My implanted purpose is to take Farnikos and the rest into custody."

"Couldn't you go back to the day they arrive, and take them then?"

"Arrest them before they break the Code?"

"But you know they've broken it since then."

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"They won't if I arrest them beforehand. Besides that, it would be a Secondary Convolution—"

"Secondary Convolution?"

The stranger gasped, a muscle twitching in his lean cheek. "There's no way I can explain transtemporal topology to a primitive. Just let me say that if their interference is a crime, mine would be a disaster."

"Like for instance?"

"Like a scar seething with radioactivity where the town used to be."

"Guess I can understand *that,*" Jake said. "But until we have a deal you're not going there. Till then Farnikos and company can strut around Sawyerville in complete immunity."

The terrible old man snarled, exposing teeth perfect and faintly luminous, but Jake knew he had him in a bind. "*Deal?* Oh yes, bargain—what kind of bargain?"

"Nobody dies."

"Two deaths are recorded."

"Are the two cases of arson recorded?"

The man from the future stared with his yellow eyes, but Jake knew all he had to do was wait the foreigner out.

Finally: "You're right. It's a *bargain,* a contract—ah, what you call a deal. We will use the battery of anti-plague medications they brought along for self-protection. Though I can't promise all the individuals infected will survive. Anyone too far gone—"

"Fair enough," Jake said.

They slid to a stop two blocks south of Main Street, and Jake helped the time traveler unfold himself off Bill's snowmobile; during the trip his grotesque posture and hands dangling over Bill's shoulders had reminded Jake of a praying mantis.

They waited in the dimness while Grover went to see if all the outsiders were at the Pigpen. "If you're loaded for bear," Bill asked the lean old man, "does it really matter?"

"Loaded for bear?"

"It means equipped for any emergency."

The time traveler turned his yellow eyes on Bill for a moment before going back to an automatic 60-degree scan of the street. "Oh, I'm equipped, both genetically and in terms of energy implants. Which is why it's better to surprise them. If they're all away from their rooms in this—ah, caravansary—"

"Motel."

"Motel—then I can enter without destruction—which is better—you don't want any more buildings burned."

"That's for sure," Bill agreed vehemently.

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After Grover came back to tell them all seven were at their table in the bar they moved off toward the Sawyer House, Jake still holding the stranger's metal-caged arm in case he slipped.

"Wait just a second," he said in the lobby, and went around the desk.

Manuela looked up and put her finger to her lips as he came into the dim back room. "Norma's sleeping."

"Good," Jake whispered back. "Let's keep it that way. I want both of you to stay here, no matter what. There may be a little action down in the right wing, but you stay put. Okay?"

Manuela chuckled. "What else can we do?"

"Maybe pray," Jake whispered.

They followed the tall old man down the hall, silently gliding now, as if he'd reset his walking harness to stealth mode.

"Room 34's the first," Jake murmured.

"No need to tell me," said the time traveler. Jake believed him, because now the old man's watch cap was off, exposing antennae on his bald head like blue worms and erectile black bristles and slowly moving pink corkscrews.

He turned back the way they had come and a glowing wall closed off the hall behind. "Just so we aren't disturbed."

Outside the room he put his hand six inches from the metal door; it shuddered and swung slowly open. The light went on without his having to touch the switch. Once past the door, the old man pointed to its back: "That was your problem. An artificial life form made for this single function."

Jake stared at the iridescent, silvery sheet that covered most of the back, edged with stubby tentacles that must have been clinging to the doorframe before they withdrew.

But the rest of the room was even more surprising. The walls seemed to be crawling very slowly before Jake realized it was a barely visible abstract pattern, moving to a rhythm he couldn't quite analyze but found oddly pleasing. And when he looked at the bed, he understood why the outsiders had never asked for a change of sheets: floating just above it was a feathery (or was it fingery?) scarlet shape that make Jake think of a waterbed, air mattress, hammock all at once, except he was sure it was more comfortable than any of them.

The grim old man went to a dark cube in the corner and leaned over. When he stood up the flashing lights on its surface had gone out. "They'll be helpless when I've neutralized every PPS. Though they're as good as helpless now."

"PPS?" Jake asked.

"Personal Power Source," the time traveler explained and led the way

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to the next room. According to Jake's best information, 36 was Sania Kleevin's room.

It looked it: the pattern crawling on these walls was black and blue and green, the floating bed was midnight blue, and over all a faint epicene voice sang sweetly, acidly. The words were English, but didn't make much sense, something about "tyling the flot till the coos come home."

The old man stopped Kleevin's PPS and went on to open a third door. Just as it sagged, he turned and looked over his shoulder down the hall. "They're coming," the Adjuster said, and Jake remembered the knowing way Farnikos and Sania had grinned at him after he'd failed with the passkey the night before.

The seven gamblers from the future rounded the corner at the far end, came to a dead stop at the wall of light as it started to pulse, after a moment turned and ran back out. The Adjuster put another glowing wall in front of the outside door only ten feet away, then turned his attention to the next room.

There were only two PPSs left to go when Jake smelled smoke and shouted the alarm.

"Trying to burn their way in," explained the old man, barely raising his voice, as he made his way into the next-but-last room. "Containable."

Jake was in the doorway watching him deactivate the PPS inside when two smoke alarms went off and Grover yelled "Here they come!"

They came bolting out of one of the rooms with open doors in a cloud of smoke, Farnikos in the lead, wearing a glove with an index finger elongated by a red-lit tube; a weapon for sure.

Jake grabbed for his gun, but the tall old man pushed past him. Farnikos' extended finger emitted a blue-white beam that died halfway to the Adjuster. In return another glowing wall formed around them, this time hemispherical and contracting, forcing the outsiders and the smoke together and back through the door.

The old man smiled mildly at Jake, then took his own sweet time opening Room 40 and neutralizing the last PPS; Jake didn't begrudge him the leisure a bit.

"Ridiculous, right?" said the Transtemporal Adjuster. "And also sordid. The ability to visit any time at all, so much power, and they used it merely to change the odds."

The seven did look ridiculous, squeezed into one end of the room with furniture overturned by the contracting wall of light, coughing in the compressed smoke, sooty faces distorted by the shifting of the field. What bothered Jake was that he couldn't be sure which was Sania Kleevin.

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"And the arrogance! Notice the jacket Farnikos is wearing—totally against the Transtemporal Code to wear it here."

"I've been noticing it for days. Snakeskin from a mighty big snake."

The old man laughed. "Not exactly snakeskin. The hide of a small carnivorous dinosaur of the species *Dromaeosaurus,* lately fashionable in our time."

He precipitated the smoke inside the bubble, nodded when the gamblers stopped coughing after a minute. "Now I can keep my promise to you. I detected the presence of their medical casket in Room 37. You said there are three showing symptoms?"

"So far."

"Then we must reach the persons at risk immediately."

Jake pointed at the seven in the bubble. "But what about them? Won't they smother in there?"

"I'm setting the field to allow sufficient gaseous diffusion. Though they might become a little warmer than comfortable."

Norma perked up almost immediately after her injection, but the Temporal Adjuster insisted Manuela, Jake, Grover, and Bill roll up their sleeves before he went any further. There was a momentary feeling of what could be either terrible heat or cold—"cutaneous sterilization" explained the old man as he positioned the device—and then a blow like a light punch to the biceps.

When they reached Mike's house Doc had already sealed Mike in the body bag. "Wish you could have shown up a day earlier," Doc said as the old man from the Moon bent over him with the injector.

"Understandable," the Adjuster said. "But we are limited by our instrumentation here and now, and none of us dare loop back twice for fear of causing temporal disaster."

"Temporal disaster."

"Don't even ask, Doc," Jake warned.

"That bad?"

"That bad," said the lean old man.

Jake frowned as the prisoners in the bubble winked out of existence one by one. "So now you're taking them out of my jurisdiction?"

"They've committed crimes not even listed in your time. Far beyond arson. Though I assure you that will be among the charges they face back in our time."

The Adjuster turned to Doc. "I've kept part of my bargain with Jake. But others may be still be infected, and therefore I must teach you how to use the injector. After that I want to speak to all who I've seen since I arrived."

"About keeping your visit a secret, I suppose."

The old man smiled. "Exactly."

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When they were all sitting in Norma's room behind the registration desk, the Temporal Adjuster indicated Doc. "Your medical expert has already guessed what I have to tell you."

"He wants us to keep his secret," Doc announced.

"I promise," Jake said. "*Si,*" Manuela said, among a chorus of agreement, and Bill added, "You can trust us."

"Oh I can, I can indeed," laughed the old man, and everything went blacker than black, darker than any night Jake had ever seen. "Thanks to selective amnesia and implanted memories."

"But what if someone else comes down with the plague?" Jake heard Doc ask.

"I'll tell you where I'm burying the medical casket. You'll remember that if you need to, and how to use the injector. If you don't the casket will self-destruct in two weeks."

"It's not fair!" snapped Norma. "We all promised."

"Perhaps not. But it's certain."

"Wait," Jake murmured, and then he was drowning in a flood of darkness.

Jake blinked across at the figure on the other cot in the bleak morning light. Then he remembered that Doc's place had burned down, and Mike and somebody from outside had died of plague.

But what else was he trying to remember?

Doc's eyes opened without seeing, then focused. "Jake?"

"Yeah, Doc—"

"I had the strangest dream."

Then Jake remembered. "Me too. Really crazy one." ●

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ON WANDERER'S DAY

On Wanderer's Day on Talus Five,
the mad are freed to wander in the streets,
and some it's true get bloody when they do,
while some get frightened and go back inside.

Some do the things nobody dares to do,
some do what all do but are not discreet
about the where, or how, or who it's to.

Some do the sad but scarey things
the sane would do but are afraid to think
of doing, while the mad think anything they like,
like anything they think, do what they like
and then forget the heartache got or caused,
just like the sane.

What's hardest done about the gathering in
is finding who the mad are once they're free,
for some get money or get lasting fame

and some, as madmen often do,
become the leaders of the State,
start bloody wars or bring them to an end,
collapse economies, or start thriving trade,
build, burn, bomb, break or merely mend.

It's all what Wanderer's Day is meant to teach,
the obvious, daily life makes men forget,
you cannot tell the madmen from the great
until too late.

—William John Watkins

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Jack McDevitt

WINDRIDER

This fall, Jack McDevitt's new novel—*The Engines of God*—will be released in paperback by Ace/Berkley, and in a leatherbound edition by Easton Press. Mr. McDevitt has begun work on a new novel that is tentatively titled *The Infinite Coast*.

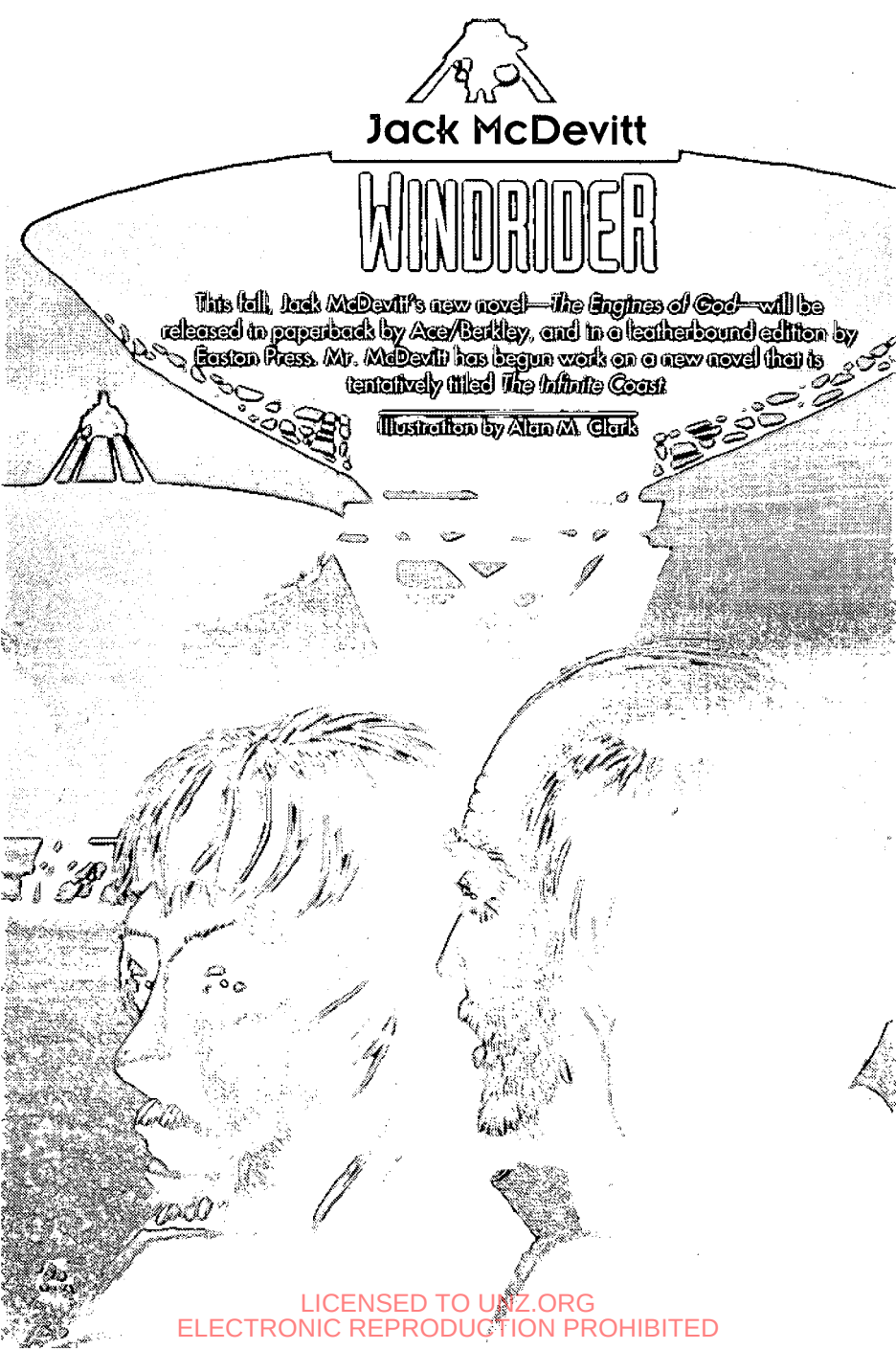

Illustration by Alan M. Clark

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The Navigators towered over the desert. Unmoving, enigmatic, ominous, they thrust ribbed bowls at the sky. *Help us.* Moonlight filled the bowls, silvered the supporting beams and struts, and touched the network of ground rails that connected the giants with each other.

They shall be a sign of my promise to you.

Hammond hunched forward on his horse. The wind was warm and dry out of the north. The breath of the Almighty. He lowered his binoculars, unslung them, and handed them to James. "God is good," he said.

The old man lowered his cowl. "Amen."

There were eighty-three of them, of identical dimensions, each approximately ten stories high from its wheeled base to the highest point on the bowl. Most of the Navigators pointed in the same direction, toward the southwest, at an elevation of about thirty-two degrees. A few, out of step, looked elsewhere, two or three toward Ayer's Rock, others away to the east, one toward Hammond as if it were contemplating *him.* Several had collapsed into the dry earth.

Iris Windrider is gone to look for Eden. The Navigators showed her the way, as they shall one day show the way for you.

"There was a time when we sailed the twilight," said James, chanting the line.

Hammond responded: *"And the greatest of those who rode the wind was Iris."*

Hammond turned in his saddle. "It's always good to come here," he said.

The old man sighed and handed the glasses back. "It is. And maybe tonight the old promise will be fulfilled." The wind pulled at his white hair.

"God in his own good time," said Hammond. In James's presence, he always felt a rush of piety.

And when the sun grew deadly, Iris fled beyond the sea, to find a green, cool land.

James frowned. "I would *like* to believe," he said, wearily. "I really would. But I will admit to you, George, and deny it if you quote me: I suspect there was no Iris, and there is no land but this." He shook off the mood that was visibly settling on him. "God forgive me."

"But they have *moved,* James. Surely, the promise is about to be fulfilled."

The older man allowed his mount to move slowly forward, across sand and crabgrass. "In my lifetime? I would give much to see it, George. But there have been reports before." The moon was cool and soft in a clear sky. "The Faithful tend to see what they hope to see."

The giants stood silent.

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"The east grows light," said Hammond. "Perhaps we should camp for the day."

"When we are so close?" James clapped him on the back and laughed. Hammond wished he would make less noise. It did not seem right, out here. "We have time to settle the issue. Let's do *that*. Then we can sleep."

They approached the nearest Navigator. Hammond felt the power of his God in its enigmatic lines, allowed it to flow through him. *Iris, pilot of the Almighty, show me the way.* The childhood prayer, grown mechanical by usage, had a special meaning here, in this ultimate sanctuary.

James stopped just outside the circle of the Navigator, and bowed his head. Hammond waited. The old man remained perfectly still for several minutes; he glanced at the sky, said something to his horse, and dismounted. He seemed to have forgotten his companion.

The base of the Navigator was a thick flared shaft, enclosed by steel mesh and crossbeams. James led his horse forward, and looked up at the bowl. He nodded and took a thick binder from his saddle bag. He set the binder on the ground, and walked slowly around the perimeter, staring up all the while.

Hammond climbed off his horse, and approached.

James got down on his knees, flipped pages in the binder, took a straight edge out of his pocket and set it against the paper. He circled the Navigator again, a few feet further out this time, alternately raising and lowering his eyes. "Very good," he said. He rummaged in his saddlebag and produced a writing board and more paper. "George—"

Hammond had anticipated him. He'd already lit the oil lamp and started toward the old man.

"Excellent," he said. "Thank you."

The binder contained sketches of the Navigators. James held one close to the light, studied it, and lifted it to compare it with the object itself.

"What do you think?" asked Hammond.

His words hung in the still air. James shook his head. "Don't know yet." He untied a staff from the horse. It had a sighting device at one end and a sharp point at the other. He walked off thirty paces, and planted the staff in the earth. Hammond provided light while he took several measurements. At length, his deep blue eyes found him, and they filled with joy. "It's true," he said. "It *has* moved."

Hammond sank to his knees.

Breathlessly, James was consulting his charts, and placing more measuring rods around the area.

Hammond's own faith had lapsed in recent years, although he had never admitted it to anyone. Now, he felt the full power and thrust of its return. It flooded through him, and tears welled from his eyes. "Do you

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mean," he said, when he could trust his voice, "that it has moved on the track?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so, George." He was pacing off the distances between his markers. "Nothing has traveled on these rails for a long time. But the *bowl* has changed its position." He bent down to take a line of sight. "Yes," he said, "I think that will work just fine." And he proceeded to walk energetically from staff to staff, squinting and drawing lines on his writing board. "Very good," he told himself. And, "Yes, of course. Has to be." He sat down periodically and re-examined the binder. He prowled in circles, lost in thought. And then he repeated the entire operation. When he'd finished, he measured the object with several of the more distant Navigators. Finally, he put everything back on the horse. Then he clasped Hammond by his shoulders and squeezed, and Hammond saw that his cheeks were wet. "Yes," he said, squeezing out the final consonant.

"It really happened."

"We must be cautious, but it's difficult at a time like this. Yes, He has not forgotten us, George. Look. See here." His fingers jabbed and clenched. "The bowl has swung to the west. And its angle of elevation has increased. *This* is what it used to be; and here is what it is now." Hammond saw that both changes were only a few degrees. But it *had* moved. Not the *carriage,* but only the bowl.

"Thank God," said Hammond.

James's appearance was quite unremarkable. He was about middle height, thin, with features reddened and creased by the desert. His hair was silver and almost gone; and he walked with a slight limp, imposed by a gunshot wound he had taken in one of numerous skirmishes during his youth. He had an amiable smile, and the dancing expressive eyebrows of a girl. He laughed easily, and heartily, and was a good traveling companion. When they were on the road, James did not hesitate to lift a cup of wine or ale, and he enjoyed Hammond's risque stories, although he never offered any of his own. His eyes were blue and intense, but the spirit that animated them seemed often to withdraw to distant places. At this moment, however, that spirit was very much in evidence. It blazed through his countenance. "They've *all* moved," he said.

The Navigators stood in their lines against that awful desolation. "Are you sure?"

"No. Not sure. But I think so. Almost all."

Yes: some had gone awry, abandoning the precision and symmetry that marked this curious army. "Like those who lose their faith," said James, speaking perhaps about himself. "It deprives one of purpose, of a reason for existence."

The dawn was gathering force. They had passed sheltered ground

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about a mile back, a hillside that would provide reasonable protection from the sun. "It's getting late," said Hammond, "We need to get under cover."

"What do you suppose they are looking at?"

It was a question that had not occurred to him. They were only metal; consequently how could they be looking at anything? And yet, there was something of design and intent and awareness in them. They were looking toward the southwest.

"What do you make of it, James? Is God trying to send us a message?"

"Be assured that, if He wishes to communicate, He will."

The strangeness of the place stirred old feelings in Hammond. He had not been here since he was a child. But he had visited other odd places, at Adelaide and Melbourne, and along the coast, where the desolation of the great malls and the empty avenues was palpable. But here, there was a sense of great loss, and great promise.

If one day Iris truly called them, *Come, follow me,* the sign would be given *here.* If there was any truth at all to the ancient promise, it would be revealed here.

Something appeared at the edge of his vision.

Light.

Several lights, in fact. Clustered toward the north. Faint, but visible all the same. On the other side of the Navigators. But they had not been there moments ago.

He reached inside his shirt, and touched his pistol. It felt warm and reassuring.

He raised the binoculars. The lights gave off a steady glow, unlike the sparkle and flicker of a campfire. James was moving slowly away from him, absorbed in the moment. "There's someone out there."

The old man swung round in his saddle. "Where?"

Hammond pointed.

James leaned forward, and gazed into the dark. "That's strange," he said.

There was something in his voice. "Why?"

"It's the Chapel. Someone's in the Chapel."

Hammond had forgotten the nondescript, crumbling, five-story building on the edge of the sacred ground. *The Chapel.* Not in his time. But he assumed religious services had been held there years ago. *Decades* ago. "Best we leave," he said.

"No, George." He stroked his mount, looking toward the lights, and toward the approaching dawn.

"We don't know who they are." He wondered why anyone would be inside the ancient building.

"It might be why we came."

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No. "It is more likely to be brigands. Cutthroats." *Or dark gods. Things in the night.* He didn't say that, of course, but he felt spooked.

"George, we have come a long way." He was speaking in his brook-no-nonsense tone. "You are a man of faith."

"Yes." Hammond was not sure, but he saw no reason to make that point.

"Then let us put ourselves in the hands of the Almighty."

The structure stood bleak and dry. Its weatherbeaten front was pale in the gathering dawn. Stone walls were scored and blotched, unbroken by any attempt at decoration. In front, a fountain had long since gone to dust.

The lights were visible through four curtained windows on the third floor.

They sat and watched for several minutes, and saw no movement inside. "They could shoot us down," said Hammond, "and we'd never know what hit us."

James nodded, but said nothing.

They rode around front, and stopped before a set of double doors at the top of a wooden staircase. The stairs did not look safe. Black panels lined the roof.

"Glass," James said. Rooftop glass panels were a common feature of old buildings scattered across the Outback. There were also odd devices atop the structure that looked like (but were not quite) miniatures of the Navigators.

They circled the building. Saw no movement. No horses. No tracks.

Hammond's hair prickled. "Nobody's gone in or out in a long time," he said. His voice wasn't working right.

The first waves of heat were already rolling out of the east. "You would have preferred to find bandits, wouldn't you?" said James.

Hammond thought it over. Going face to face with the Almighty was daunting. "Yes."

"So would I."

The horses stood very still.

"What now?" asked Hammond.

Hesitation. "How far to shelter?"

"*Too* far. We'll have to use the building, pitch the tent against the north side. But I don't like being this close to it. Until we find out what's happening inside."

"I have a better idea," said James.

The front doors were locked.

Hammond selected a window that looked into a small room. The glass

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was long gone, but the sash was badly split. Several wooden chairs were piled in one corner, beside a collapsed desk. The floor was littered with rubbish: shriveled pictures inside broken frames, a rusted metal pot, travel bags filled with rags. A plastic blind lay half-covered with sand.

He tried to clear out the wood quietly, gave up, and knocked it loose with his gun butt. "I'll open up," he told James, and climbed in.

Doorways revealed an adjoining room, somewhat larger, but in similar condition; and a passageway.

James stood at the window, watching.

He crossed the room, sinking in sand, and stepped out into the corridor. Moments later he was at the two big front doors. Neither worked, but he was able to pull one off its hinges. It was too heavy for him to handle, and it fell against one wall, slid down, and whunked into the sand.

James strode in, like Solomon entering the temple. He was erect, and his eyes shone, but Hammond knew he'd had to get up his nerve, and this was all an act. "Have you heard anything?" he asked in a tight voice.

"No. Nothing. Listen: I'll check the building. You wait here. If anything happens, clear out. Okay?"

He shook his head. "We'll go together."

"No. You're not armed." *Not as if he thought weapons would help against whatever it was they faced.* He smiled at James. "I'll be fine."

Before he could protest, Hammond started down the passageway. Several doors were ajar or open, and he peered into rooms that were not particularly different from the one by which he'd entered. A wide wooden staircase bisected the building. He looked again for prints, for evidence that anyone had passed through, and saw nothing.

He started up. The stairs groaned. Shadows moved, and the wind blew against the walls. It was warm and oppressive.

He drew his gun at the second-floor landing. Peered both ways along another hallway filled with trash. Some doors hung open. Outside, the horses were getting restless.

He climbed one more level.

This time, egress to the corridor was partially blocked by a massive cabinet which someone had dragged out onto the landing and left. He edged past it, looked toward the front of the building, and saw light. Streaks of it came from two doors across the hall. Still there was no sound that should not be there.

His pulse raced. He took off his boots, and moved quietly down the corridor. The closer of the two doors was partially open. There was a chair inside, and more trash. He eased his way in holding his breath.

Panels in the ceiling glowed brightly. He caught his breath and resisted the impulse to run. It was not fire, but something else. Something else. Like metal held in the bright light of the dawn.

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He watched for several moments, and then lowered his eyes. The room was long. Several tables supporting metal boxes and devices were set along the walls. Shelves circled the room, and these too were crowded with boxes and instruments that Hammond did not recognize. There were several chairs in various states of collapse. Cords snaked up the walls.

Outside, the desert was pale. The sun touched the Navigators. His fears drained away, in the golden light of that morning. And joy stirred in his breast.

The second door, and all four windows, opened off this room. He stepped cautiously through the tangle of clutter and cables that lay on the floor. Two pitchers and nine glasses, filled with dust, were set on a table off to one side.

He stopped to examine a cabinet, opened the door, and became gradually aware that something was moving behind him. He turned slowly, swinging the gun around. An *eye* watched him.

It glowed, and it was enormous, and it was suspended in a box mounted against a wall.

He shrieked, fell to his knees, and pulled the trigger. The weapon fired and bucked and something shattered across the room. But the eye did not move, did not blink, and Hammond rolled under a table to escape its terrible gaze.

He heard James pounding up the stairs, calling his name.

"James," he roared, "stay back."

"What's happening?" The old man sounded terrified.

"Don't come in here." He squeezed off two more shots, three, and the third one went home and the image shattered and vanished and left only a smoking hole and gray slate. Gray plastic. Something.

He saw another one, on a flat panel mounted on the wall beside the door he'd entered.

It watched him through a haze. It was blue and cold and emotionless. But Hammond had put his fear behind him now. He knew the thing could be destroyed. He raised the gun.

James burst through the door. "What's happening?"

"Get away from there," screamed Hammond.

James saw the direction of Hammond's stare, glanced to his left, and jumped a foot. Hammond held his fire: he was trembling, and wasn't sure where the bullet might go. He was out from under the table now. advancing on the *thing*. James had crashed into a cabinet, but he held on to it, and stared at the *eye*. He seemed to have regained some of his composure. "Wait," he said, waving Hammond back.

Hammond stopped. His heart pounded in his throat.

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James now horrified his companion by letting go of the cabinet, and taking a tentative step *toward* the object.

"Get back," said Hammond.

James waved him aside. And moved closer.

Hammond waited for a bolt of lightning to strike him down. But nothing happened, and James, seemingly encouraged by the lack of activity, approached the thing, reached up, and *touched* it. It was the single most glorious act of courage Hammond had seen in his lifetime.

He started to laugh. "It's only a picture," he said. He waved Hammond forward, and put an affectionate arm around his shoulders. "Look." He made a fist and knocked on it. *Bonk.*

The thing watched him coldly. How could a *picture* be so *real?*

"I don't think it can harm us," James said.

Hammond kept a respectful distance. "I'll blow you up too," he told the image, "if you move."

The old man smiled indulgently. "I think we can assume we are safe here," he said. "If there were people in the building, the noise would surely have brought them." He glanced around. "It is very much the way I remember it."

"You have been here before? In this room?"

"I'm not sure. Probably. There are several rooms like this. But I don't recall that anything actually *worked.*" He drew his fingertips across the face of the image, leaving tracks in the dust.

Despite its appearance of three dimensions, the image was *flat.* Its surface was warm and hard. Now, under more dispassionate examination, he could see that the object was a sphere rather than an eye. It was blue, with brown patches. The top and bottom of the sphere were white, *brilliantly white,* and wisps of haze clung to it. He used his sleeve to wipe away the dust. The haze remained. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before." James found a safe chair, set it before the image, and sat down. Hammond, feeling a need to *act,* cruised through the room, looking behind cabinets, opening doors, peering under tables. He wanted no more surprises. He stuck his head out into the hallway. "Is anyone here?" he called. "Anybody?"

His voice echoed through the building.

"I wonder," said James, "if it *really* is a picture, or if the sphere is actually in the *box?*"

Hammond didn't know, and no longer really cared. He looked out one of the windows. The flat plain stretched far away, red and dreary and empty. This did not seem to him to be the work of the Almighty. The Navigators, yes. But not the narrow cramped devices and their unearthly images. "We still don't know who turned on the lights," he said.

James seemed to notice for the first time the luminous overhead panels.

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"I don't know," he said. "But I think you were right: no one's been in here in a long time."

"What is it a picture *of?"* Hammond asked.

"I don't know that either. A crystal of some sort, perhaps." He seemed puzzled. Whatever he had expected to find, this was not it. "The Lord moves in mysterious ways," he said. "Look here." He pointed at a plastic panel fitted with rows of studs. "They're marked with numbers and letters. Maybe they're printing machines. This might be the way they made books." He touched them cautiously, as if they were sacred.

"Who turned on the lights?" persisted Hammond.

James shook his head. "The building is old. The technology is advanced. Maybe it turns itself on. Maybe the wind blew too hard against the walls and ignited something. I've heard of such things. In any case, I doubt we'll ever know for sure. But we have a story to tell when we get home."

They brought the horses inside, moved them into an inner hallway, away from windows, and set out water and grain. Hammond dug into his saddle bags for dried beef and nuts. James filled two cups with wine, and they toasted their good fortune.

Afterward, Hammond escorted his companion back upstairs, and then set out to complete his task of exploring the building. The rooms everywhere looked long unused. He saw equipment similar to the devices they'd found on the third floor. Much of it was caked with dirt and, even to *his* eyes, not functional. Chairs and desks and wall cabinets were liberally distributed. He dusted off some framed photographs. The images in them were mostly of elderly men. They wore a type of clothing that he had seen pictures of in James's books.

There were also pictures of the Navigators, brilliant beneath a bright sun. He looked carefully and saw none that had fallen over. And there were more globes, like the one upstairs that had frightened him. They came in a range of colors, and some had shining rings.

The basement was filled with equipment and furniture, packed so tightly he could scarcely squeeze between the pieces.

"Why is it called the Chapel?" he asked James. "I can't believe anyone ever conducted services here."

James was sitting in front of the globe image with a cup of cool water. He sipped it, and his brow furrowed. "It has always had that name," he said. "But I don't recall when it was ever anything other than what it is today." He leaned forward and frowned again, this time directing his attention to the image. "I think it's getting bigger," he said.

"What is?"

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"The globe." He crossed his hands over his belly. "I suspect this building received its name simply from its proximity to the holy ground."

By midafternoon, it had swollen beyond the dimensions of the box, and filled the panel. Its roundness was now concealed. The white sections that had dazzled him earlier were almost gone, squeezed out of the picture. The globe was mostly blue, and it was lovely, the blue of deep sky and the sea. The brown portions had acquired grays and yellows and split into a confusion of tones.

James prowled restlessly among the tables, poking at the studs with their odd symbols, trying to peer into the back of the box that supported the globe-image, and pressing his ear against the image itself. He had cleared the dust off numerous pieces of equipment, and he explored these with great interest. He showed Hammond how to get the machines to hum and lamps to burn. They both laughed when strings of symbols appeared on the panels, and colors in abstract shapes, and, on one delirious occasion, another globe. The *same* one. They left it on, and now they had *two* pictures of the object. "Identical," said James.

"Does that mean anything?"

"It makes me wonder whether each box generates its own image. Or whether it's created at a central site. Maybe we're looking through field glasses. Of a sort."

The word "menu" appeared often. The term was not familiar to Hammond. "It is archaic," James explained, "and it means a list of dinners that one might order in a tavern."

"I don't understand why it is here."

"Neither do I." The bottom of the image contained the instruction, *Press f-1 for help*. He did so, and more lines of text appeared. He could read it, but he had no idea what any of it meant. "Magic," he said, laughing softly. "They were wizards. How did they do such things?"

And how could they let it all slip away? "They were good craftsmen," Hammond said. "Wizards, in their way. But it did not help them."

James shrugged. "The sun became dangerous. Not much anyone could do about that."

So Iris Windrider raced ahead, beyond the sea, to find a cooler land.

And the blue and brown sphere continued to grow. In fact, by sundown, one could literally *watch* it expand.

During dinner, while James admitted his bewilderment at what they had seen, and Hammond wondered how he could persuade his companion to start for home, more symbols blinked on, superimposed over the globe. They were white block characters:

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IRIS: YEAR 372, DAY 212 // ALPHA CENTAURI III

Orbit:

SIDEREAL PERIOD:	0.87 Standard Yr
PERIHELION:	0.93 AU's
APHELION:	0.96 AU's

Globe:

EQUATORIAL DIAMETER:	15,300 km
OBLATENESS:	0.004
MASS (EARTH = 1):	1.06
DENSITY (WATER = 1):	5.3
ALBEDO:	0.44
AXIS TILT (DEG):	18.7
PERIOD (D/H/M):	1/1/17

ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION (ARTIFICIAL): None Noted

MEAN EQUATORIAL NOON TEMPERATURE (EST): 28°C.

Hammond stared at the symbols. "What does it say?"

James's face had gone white. "My God," he said. His voice was choked. "Look at the first word."

Hammond looked. "What is it? What does it say?"

"It is *her* name," he said. "*Iris.*"

James copied the message down and puzzled over it through much of the evening. Hammond took the horses out for water and pasture. He rarely noticed that he could not read, seldom had reason to regret the deficiency. But today he felt his limitations. He promised himself that he would make time to learn.

When he returned, he found James in a state of exhilaration. The old man was hunched in front of the box, glowing with pleasure.

The image had changed dramatically. The sphere was gone, and they seemed to be looking deep into a patch of blue sky. But they were falling: white clouds swept *upward*, from the bottom of the picture. A new legend had appeared:

SEPARATION COMPLETED 031143Z.

"What's happening, James?"

"I'm not sure. But God may be using these instruments to allow us to see the final moments of the voyage of the Windrider."

"How could that be? Where is it coming from?"

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"Beyond the sea, no doubt." James wiped the back of his hand across his lips. He looked drained. "George, she is speaking to us. *To us. To you and me.*"

Hammond, obeying some deep, primitive reflex, fell to his knees. Elation and awe washed through him. His entire life, all the things he had known during his thirty-odd years, every sunrise, seemed to point to this instant. As if he had been given sudden sharp purpose, as if everything he had ever done had been directed toward arriving at this precise moment. He clasped the old man's arm.

"She's found Eden. Somewhere out there, she's found a land where the sun is cool and the rivers are full. And she is using the technology of her time to show us. And to urge us to follow."

"Follow the Windrider?"

"Why not? The Navigators have shown us the way. All we need do is set our compass to the southwest."

"But she travels through the sky. We cannot go *there*." White clouds billowed, brilliant in the sunshine. "How could we possibly do it?"

"A stout boat," said James. "There is nowhere we cannot go with a stout boat. And faith."

ATMOSPHERIC ANALYSIS:	
NITROGEN	79.114%
CARBON DIOXIDE	16.308%
OXYGEN	2.395%
ARGON	0.744%
HELIUM	0.431%
NEON	0.410%
METHANE	0.261%
KRYPTON	0.227%
NITROUS OXIDE	0.082%
XENON	0.028%
BIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS:	NEGATIVE●

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DRINK

Mark W. Tiedemann

Mark W. Tiedemann has sold stories to Esther M. Friesner's *Alien Made Pregnant by Elvis* anthology and to *Tomorrow SF*. He's attempting to finish up a dozen new stories and a novel, but this process has recently been complicated by the acquisition of a "resident alien lifeform"— a.k.a. a puppy.

Illustration by Jonathan and Lisa Hunt

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Madrin awoke suffocating. His right arm was pinned beneath him. In his mind, he saw the beast above him, lowering its wet mouth to rip out his throat. Madrin swung his left arm out and kicked to get away. His head struck something solid. The beast vanished, and Madrin opened his eyes. Darkness enveloped him.

He tried to fill his lungs to scream and tasted wool. Twisting, he freed his arm and scraped the blanket from his face. He jumped up, throwing the blanket, and pressed his back against the stone wall.

A taper burned on a wooden shelf across the small room. In its wan yellow light, the blanket looked black, the cloak of the beast. Madrin's panicked breaths almost drowned the sound of blood in his ears.

Flashes of his dream kicked his heart: the beast wrestled him to the earth, still unslaked after having taken everyone else, and covered him with its mouth, whispering "Drink . . . drink . . . drink . . . I thirst. . . ."

The dream changed details from time to time, but never its essence. Madrin wished—sometimes prayed, when he thought it might accomplish something for him—that he could change the dream completely. He felt dreams ought to be more malleable than reality, which he could never change. His parents were still dead, their bodies drained to quench a thirst that would have taken *him*, too, if Brother Renard had not intervened. The beast could not hurt him anymore.

Maybe. So Brother Renard had promised. But other things Renard had said had turned out to be lies, or at least not the truth his words had implied.

The wall was cool. Madrin closed his eyes and rested his head back against the stone. I hurt, he thought to God, I hurt deep, and still You don't make the memories go away. . . .

Madrin looked at the roughhewn crucifix on the wall above his pallet. When Brother Renard had given it to him, he had been filled with gratitude. "I'm safe now," he had said. The monk had shaken his head. "No. This is only a temporary crutch. You'll only be safe when you accept the Sacrament and join us. You must take our Lord into yourself. When you become one of us, then your soul will have the promise of eternal life."

"But until then, I have a protector." Madrin remembered his words clearly, remembered that he had believed it then. The cross was like his dead father's knife, possessing a plain perfection of purpose. But the little crucifix seemed less powerful in the dark. It did nothing to keep the dreams at bay. "How many more times do I have to see my mother die?" he asked it. His father's knife, hidden now beneath his bedding, had done nothing to keep the beast away either.

He heard noises out in the corridor. It was too soon for Matins. The monastery was still in the nameless time between Compline and the first vigils. Everyone *should* have been in their room, sleeping or praying. In

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the year he had been here, the monks more and more moved about at night and stayed shut away by day, destroying any sense of order Madrin tried to cling to. Madrin pulled on his robe and tied it hastily, then opened his door.

A man-shaped shadow stood in the corridor. Madrin started.

"Weren't you sleeping, Madrin?"

Brother Renard's voice was soft, almost too quiet to hear.

"Yes," Madrin said.

"But you're awake now. Were you dreaming again?"

Madrin swallowed dryly and nodded.

"Doubt," Renard said, "It's doubt."

"I'm . . . sorry. . . ." It seemed the right thing to say, though Madrin did not know why.

Brother Renard shrugged. "You have a visitor. In the refectory."

Madrin frowned. "Visitor . . . ?"

Renard reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "It may be important to remember where your allegiance lies, Madrin. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Here. To you."

"Why?"

"Because you saved me."

"From. . . .?"

"Satan. The fiend."

The hand withdrew. "Good. Remember that. All the steel in the empire cannot keep you safe, but here. . . .?"

"I have a protector."

"Good. Go on, now. See your visitor."

Madrin eased by Brother Renard and hurried to the day stairs. He descended two floors to the refectory and emerged into dim torchlight. Shadows shifted over the beams of the ceiling and across the walls like moonlit water.

A soldier stood in the middle of the hall, his back to Madrin. Madrin crossed the stone flags, wondering who he knew that was a soldier. The man turned then.

"Hanlausen!"

Cleanshaven, lean face, bright eyes, thick brown hair, the soldier smiled and opened his arms to embrace his brother.

Madrin ran to him and wrapped his arms around Hanlausen's waist. The leather jerkin felt cool against his face and the odor of horse and sweat mingled in his nostrils. A large, calloused hand scraped over Madrin's scalp, and strong arms crushed him warmly.

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Hanlausen laughed, patted Madrin's back. "By Wotan, you're growing!"

Madrin glanced over his shoulder. "It's blasphemy to call on the old gods in here."

Hanlausen shrugged. "It's still true. It's good to see you, Madrin."

Madrin grinned and it felt odd. It had been so long since he had smiled. He touched his face and laughed self-consciously.

"What's wrong?" Hanlausen asked.

"Nothing. I'm just—I didn't expect to see you again."

Hanlausen looked surprised. "Ever? You thought I'd leave my own brother somewhere and never come visit him?" He looked around at the chamber. "Though this isn't where I left you." He frowned at Madrin. "I heard about Mater and Pater. I couldn't come. We were south, far south, in Rome."

"Rome. . . .?"

"The Emperor's coronation. I'm sorry I couldn't be here. But—have they treated you well?"

Madrin shrugged. "I can think of better places to be." He winced involuntarily and looked quickly around.

Hanlausen sighed. "Well, is there any wine in this crypt? I've been on the road since midday."

Madrin turned and stopped. Brother Renard stood in the archway to the kitchens. "The best wine in the empire," he said and held up a bottle.

Hanlausen laughed. "Isn't it always, from abbeys like this? Thank you."

"I've roused a couple of the others," Renard said, setting the bottle on the long oak table. "We'll prepare your food. You must be hungry."

"True enough. Let me go see to my horse first, though."

"I'm sure it's been tended to," Renard said.

Madrin shivered briefly.

"Still," Hanlausen said. "I'd feel better making sure myself." He roughed Madrin's hair again and said conspiratorially, "I don't think they get many horses to tend here." He grinned. "I'll be back."

He hurried to the exit. Madrin watched him, mouth going dry. When he turned, Renard was gone. He bolted for the archway.

The oven fires had been started. Brother Seric and Brother Win wrestled a cauldron onto its boom. They paused to give him wide-eyed stares. Renard was nowhere in sight.

He hurried to the left, toward the salt blocks and stacked pots. He pushed through the door that connected the kitchen to the slaughterhouse. Three huge vats clustered in the center. Pens lined the far wall; pigs snuffled within. The opposite door led outside.

The air was cold. No stars showed; it had been a stormfilled month.

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Hanlausen was just entering the stables. Madrin looked around. No one had followed. He crossed the open ground to the high, wide entrance to the stables and slipped inside.

A new scent mingled with the usual stale odors of leather, oven, hay, manure—horse. The abbey possessed none. Hanlausen walked with a lantern down the length of pens to one from which the big animal leaned its head out. In the lamplight the horse's breath was thick and smokey. Madrin hurried toward his brother.

"You ought to leave," he blurted. His stomach tingled with fear.

Hanlausen started, reached automatically for his sword, then let out a long breath.

"Don't steal up on a soul like that," he said. He reached up and scratched his horse's forehead. The animal snuffled loudly. "I'd like nothing better. These old places, filled with monks . . . sometimes I think they're older than the rock they're built on. They sap the life out of a body." He shook his head and added, quietly, "I hate them." He laughed self-consciously. "Do you? Hate it here, I mean."

Madrin nodded and the tingle turned to a solid lump.

"Thought so. One more night, brother. In the morning we can leave."

"I . . . can't."

Hanlausen grabbed a pitchfork and began filling the feed trough before the horse. "Hmm? What do you mean?" He frowned at Madrin. "You didn't take vows, did you?"

"No, I—"

"Then there's nothing to keep you here."

Madrin looked back toward the stable doors. It would be wonderful.

"I've tried to leave before," he said. "Brother Renard always brings me back."

"Rightly so, too, if you just ran away. Too easy for a young boy to get lost or hurt or killed in this country. But not with me. He shouldn't object if your own brother takes you away."

Madrin shivered. "You have to leave. Tonight. This isn't a good place."

"I'll agree to that!"

He's not taking me seriously, Madrin thought angrily. He glanced back at the entrance. For an instant, he thought he saw movement, but no one was there.

"Come with me," he said. His heart hammered. "I've got to show you something."

"Just a moment . . . " Hanlausen said, emptying a bucket of water into the horse's trough.

"Now!"

Hanlausen jerked, startled, and frowned at Madrin. "Now you take

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care how you talk to me. Mater and Pater are gone, and it's my place to be head of the family. You don't—"

Madrin bared his teeth. "This is *important!*"

Hanlausen hesitated, then nodded. "All right. Show me."

Madrin led him to another door that led out of the side of the stables. Hanlausen hung the lantern on the post. It was a short distance to the barn, through the barn, into the smithy. By this circuitous route, Madrin made the way to the galilee, then into the chapter house.

Incense tainted the air. None of the braziers were lit, only candles, which provided star-points to guide the way. The small assembly room was connected to the transept of the cathedral. When they entered here, sound changed. The vastness of the place drew them in, forced eyes upward to search out the vaults, hidden in darkness. In day, light streamed through the tall windows, cast marvelous shapes on the floors, among the pews, across the sanctuary. At night, only the candles by the altar and at the entrance gave light, and it was insubstantial. The objects so illumined seemed only suggestions of the things they were by day, incomplete, and somehow false.

Madrin took Hanlausen up onto the sanctuary. Madrin's heart raced. His brother's hand hovered close to the hilt of his sword. Behind the altar, Madrin found the release for the doorway that was built into the wall below the towering crucifix. The dying Jesus stared down at him with lifeless eyes.

The door snapped open.

"Gods!" Hanlausen stepped back at the smell.

Madrin's lips curled involuntarily, and he nodded, and took a candle from the pallet nearby.

"Breathe through your mouth," he whispered. "It's not so bad then."

They ducked through the short door into a small, bare chamber.

Stretched and tied on a raised granite bier was a robed form. A pan lay beneath the slab. Madrin stayed back while Hanlausen, drawing his sword, stepped up to it. The odor was suffocating; Madrin felt his skin crawl, as if it were trying to slide off of his muscles.

In the corner lay a heap of bones.

"What's this. . . ?" Hanlausen asked.

"It killed Mater and Pater. Brother Renard captured it and brought it here. He says it can't die, only be locked away, imprisoned, in a sacred place. He says it's not really a beast, only that it's been wandering the earth, alone, for so long that it forgot what it really was."

"And what does he think it really was?"

Madrin shook his head, staring at the restrained form. "He says its blood is the source of eternal life. He says it is the Host."

Hanlausen stared at it for a long time. "In Rome," he said quietly, "I

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heard controversies—some said heresies, but I couldn't see any difference between what was said to be true and what was not—among all the priests and bishops. None of them can agree on anything. One I heard, though, got an old monk expelled. He told how when the Christian savior, Jesus, rose from the dead and walked the earth for forty days, that at the end of that time he went up to heaven. Nobody disputes that. But a few suggested it was just his soul that went, and left his body behind. This old monk said that since Jesus was the son of God, he was immortal, so that his body must have survived."

"Do you think it's true?"

Hanlausen shook his head. "Wouldn't make sense, would it? Everything else they say about this Jesus, being the son of God, why would God leave him behind, body or soul?" Hanlausen swallowed loudly. "But if one old monk in Rome can believe it. . . ."

"It killed Mater and Pater," Madrin said. "Brother Renard says that it can't die." He shook his head impatiently. "Everything here is inside-out and backward."

"I've traveled to Rome and back in the emperor's caravan," Hanlausen said. "I've seen a lot, more than I wished I had. I swear to you, though, there's nothing that can't be killed."

"I've seen it walk after being run through."

"With steel, maybe."

"It's sleeping now, but it's alive. It moves, anyway. I *said* that this was a bad place. You've got to leave. Tonight."

The figure on the bier was almost bald; long strands of dark hair clung to a veined skull. The eyes were sunken deep. The skin had the appearance of desiccated parchment. It wore a bishop's silk robe. One thin arm bore dozens of inch long scars and a few scabs.

Hanlausen gestured to the bones in the corner. "What's that?"

"The patron saint of the abbey. I forget who."

Hanlausen backed away from the bier. His hands shook.

"Brother Renard makes me do penance here," Madrin said. "He locks me in while it's awake and feeding. Brother Renard says it can't touch me as long as I have faith. I stay here while it feeds and it looks at me and all I want is for it to *die*. It never does." He looked up at Hanlausen. Tears blurred his vision for a moment, streaking the candlelight. "Renard keeps me here. He says I can have immortality if I—if I—"

Hanlausen squeezed Madrin's shoulder. "No, you are coming with me." He turned suddenly and left the chamber.

For a few seconds, Madrin was alone with the beast. He watched it intently, wondering from moment to moment if he saw it move. Then Hanlausen was back. He had a wooden crucifix in one hand, taken from

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one of the candle racks in the chancel. He ran the blade of his knife over the long arm, bringing it to a point.

"I told you I've seen a lot in the emperor's service," he said. "Many things in this world are terrible indeed . . . splinters of evil, I heard one old priest say. A lot of them get mistaken for gods or demons." The wood chips struck the floor like leaves on damp soil. A dozen strokes and the stick was sharp. "But there's *nothing* that can't be killed."

Hanlausen sheathed his knife, strode up to the bier, and drove the stick down into the breast of the beast.

It arched up against its bonds. The mouth snapped open, and Madrin glimpsed the filed teeth. He turned away, squeezed his eyes shut, and pressed against the wall. Please, please, no, let it die, don't, no, please, please, ran through his mind, directed to no one in particular. When he was a child, Wotan still ruled these lands, but the Christian priests had been here a long time, and finally Christianity replaced the old ways; then the beast came and took his kin, one by one, until Renard saved him. Saved him to use him, to serve him, to be there for night visits, someone to release guilt and anger to in endless talks designed to justify the things that Renard did. With what Hanlausen had just told him, Madrin believed now that the Christians had not so much moved into the spaces left behind by a retreat of the old gods as that they had shattered those gods, and now the shards of them continued to crawl through their old dominions. The Christian priests possessed a power that the old gods could not resist, but most of them used it clumsily, seemingly unaware that they had it. Renard was not unaware.

A hand touched his neck. He whirled. Hanlausen stood there, looking grim.

On the bier, the beast was slumped, head at an unnatural angle. The crucifix protruded from its chest. The stench was worse now.

"It's dead," Hanlausen said. "I promise, it is."

Madrin shuddered and left the chamber. He'd thought that it would feel different to be free, to know that Renard could not threaten him with the beast anymore. But now he realized that he would still have to run and hide from *Renard*. If that were possible. The world was eaten with the malignancies of such men and he no longer believed that anyone could keep him safe. Not even his mother had been able to guarantee that.

"Come on," Hanlausen said. "We ought to leave."

Madrin nodded and hurried to the annex door. It was shut and locked.

"So?" Hanlausen said. "Let's use the other door."

He strode down the middle of the nave, his boots echoing around the vaults. Madrin ran after him. In the very center, it was blackest; he could not see Hanlausen. Madrin looked back at the candlelit sanctuary.

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For an instant, he thought he saw someone moving just beyond the circle of light. He jerked around and fixed his gaze on the tall doors.

Hanlausen pushed one of them open. Cold air rushed in, brushed against Madrin's face. Beyond there was light. He sprinted for the door. Before he could reach it, Hanlausen was seized by both arms.

Brother Renard held a torch at the head of the monks. They stood around Hanlausen. Madrin hesitated at the threshold; he was still in the shadows. The torchlight bathed the scene in shifting yellow light and picked their eyes out in bright points, set their breath aglow.

"An odd way to show gratitude for hospitality," Renard said. His face was drawn, as if in pain. He started forward. "Bring him along."

Madrin scurried into shadow, crawled among the pews.

They enveloped Hanlausen. Madrin heard him shout something, followed by a sharp blow and a grunt. He peered over the pew in front of him and saw everyone gathering before the sanctuary.

Brother Renard went to the door behind the altar and ducked through. A moment later he emerged, carrying the pan. He set it on the altar.

"It wasn't enough," Brother Renard said, "that men nailed Him to a tree and wasted His gift. He told us that through Him we would all know eternal life. Through the Sacrament, we can share in His immortality. But we will find it necessary to kill Him again and again, until the Day of Judgment."

He turned to the crucifix above, spread his arms, and began Mass. The Latin droned out of him sonorously, hypnotically. Madrin rocked side to side to the rhythmic tones. His eyes grew heavy and he bumped his head on the pew.

A hand clutched his robe, and he was pulled to his feet. Renard held him at arm's length, eyes wide and somehow sad.

"I teach and teach, and *still* you do not learn," he said. He carried Madrin to the altar.

Hanlausen was stretched across the marble, blood trickling from his scalp. The pan rested beside him, its contents glistening darkly in the torchlight.

"Life eternal," Renard announced loudly. "A gift to the faithful, through the Sacrament."

He dipped a golden cup into the dark liquid in the pan and thrust a thumb into Hanlausen's mouth. Madrin felt the scream push against his teeth, a pressure both inside and out that threatened to crush him. All the monks were ill, more and more they kept to the shadows, tended to be awake only at night, their skins showing a delicate desiccation as they accepted Renard's ministries, as they accepted the Sacrament, the blood of the beast. But they all came back for more, hopeful for immortality, yearning toward each word Renard spoke. Now Father Beldag, the abbot, was almost always bedridden. But not Renard. . . .

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He poured the liquid into the unconscious warrior's mouth. Madrin's scream faded, unvoiced. Suddenly, Hanlausen jerked, choked, and tried to move.

"Hold him," Renard said.

Four monks gripped his arms and legs. Renard poured more into Hanlausen's mouth. "Drink," he said. "Drink. The blood and body of Our Lord gives us our bond to eternal life, that we may stand before Him at the end, whole and living!"

Hanlausen choked again, swallowed. Then he convulsed, his eyes bulged. His mouth opened and he screamed.

"Transubstantiation," Renard said quietly. He went back into the hidden chamber and returned a moment later with a slice of something grey. He placed his hand on Hanlausen's forehead and the soldier quieted.

Madrin squeezed his eyes closed. He did not want to see, he did not want to know.

"Eat," Renard said, his voice loud in Madrin's ears. "Do this . . . to remember . . . you carry the substance, the vitality . . . *you* shall become our benefactor. . . ."

Renard gave bread to the monks, not this. . . .

Hanlausen screamed again.

Madrin wrenched free and ran.

Tears blinded him as he left the church. He cowered in his cubicle. He stared at the crucifix on his wall and his thoughts filled with anger, rage, sadness. His brother . . . now there was no one left of his family. All that had kept him from accepting Renard's ministries was gone.

Brother Renard entered his room.

"I forgive you," he said. "You still haven't accepted God. The soldier, though, should have known better."

"My brother."

Renard smiled. "We'll forego penance this time. Perhaps you've learned your lesson. Perhaps you'll soon be ready to receive the sacrament, just as your brother was. I had hoped it would be *you* instead . . . but it was time for a new host." He touched Madrin's face gently. His fingers were cold.

Brother Renard left and Madrin did not move for a long time. His face tingled where Renard had touched him. He looked up at the crucifix. In spite of what Brother Renard said, this had nothing to do with God or Jesus, or even with the Old Gods—this was a more ancient evil. After the sound of Renard's footsteps had faded, Madrin reached under his bed for his father's knife.

He took the crucifix from the wall and began sharpening it.

"There's nothing that can't be killed," he said, over and over as he worked. "There's nothing that can't be killed." When it was sharp

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enough, he hid the crucifix and the knife in his robe and crept from his room.

Madrin slipped from shadow to shadow all the way back to the cathedral. No one was there.

He opened the hidden chamber and stepped inside.

Hanlausen, robed like a bishop, was tied to the granite bier. Blood dripped slowly from his arm to the pan on the floor. Madrin stepped up to his side and looked into his face. It was grey, lifeless. Cuts marred his neck.

Hanlausen's eyes snapped open. Madrin jerked back. His brother gazed at him with black, empty eyes. No tears, but pain. So much pain.

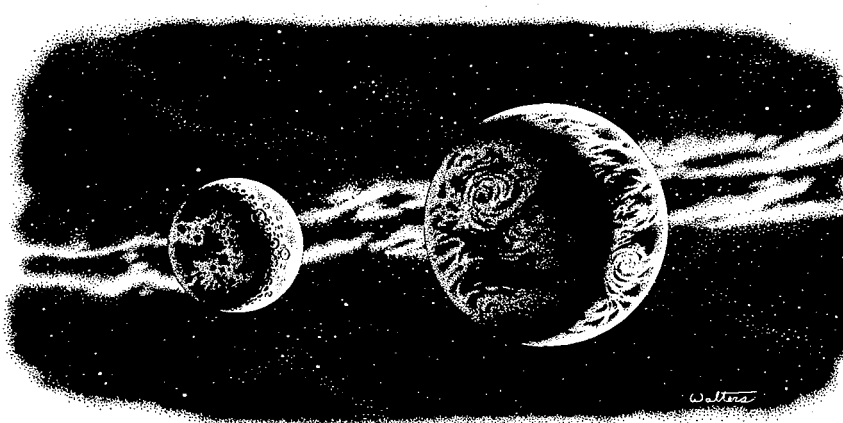
Madrin took out the crucifix and showed it to Hanlausen.

Hanlausen nodded and closed his eyes.

Madrin drove it into his brother's heart. Hanlausen shuddered, then lay still.

Madrin sat against the wall by the door and cradled the knife, waiting for Brother Renard to return.

"There's nothing that can't be killed," he repeated. But he intended never to take anything on faith again. He caressed the knife. This time, he would find out for himself. ●



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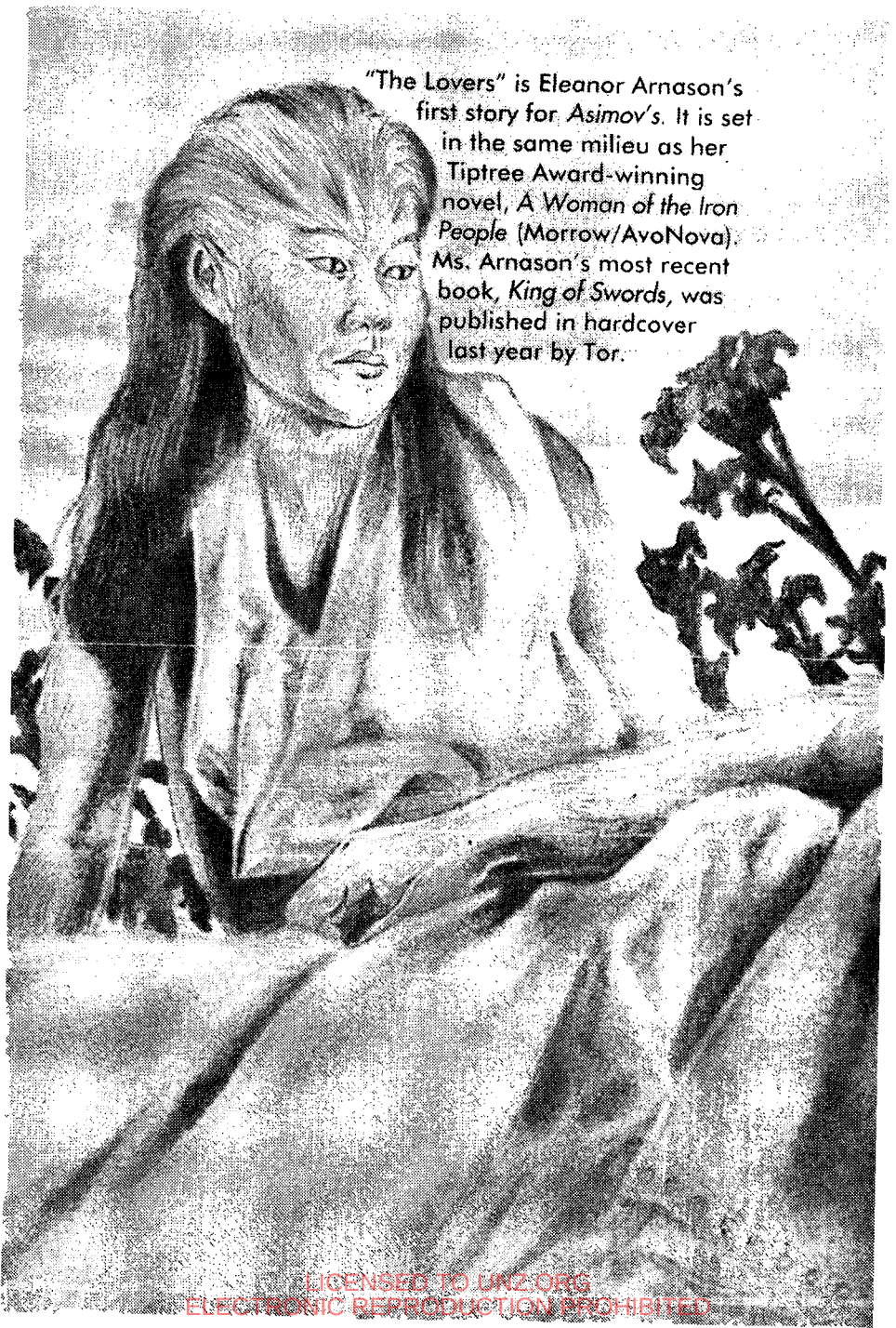

"The Lovers" is Eleanor Arnason's first story for *Asimov's*. It is set in the same milieu as her Tiptree Award-winning novel, *A Woman of the Iron People* (Morrow/AvoNova). Ms. Arnason's most recent book, *King of Swords*, was published in hardcover last year by Tor.

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Eleanor Arnason

THE LOVERS

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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There was a woman of the Ahara. She came of a good line within the lineage (1), and grew up to be tall and broad, with thick, glossy fur. Her eyes were pale grey, an unusual color in that part of the world. From childhood on, her nickname was Eyes-of-Crystal. If she had a fault, it lay in her personality. She was a bit too fierce and solitary.

Her home was in the town of Ahara Tsal, which stood on top of the Tsal River bluffs. To the west and south lay the farms and pastures of her lineage: a flat rich land. To the north and east was the river valley, wide and marshy and full of animals. Eyes-of-Crystal liked to go down there into the wilderness and ride and hunt. Her mother warned her that this was dangerous.

"You'll get strange ideas and possibly meet things and people you don't want to meet."

But Eyes-of-Crystal refused to listen.

Don't think this is a story about how she met ghosts or bandits or some horrible great animal like a *ulkuwa* and learned that her mother was right and she ought to have stayed at home. That's another story entirely, and maybe a good one. But the pain that Eyes-of-Crystal encountered did not come from disobedience, and it did not come to her when she was away from home.

As mentioned before, she grew up to be large and strong. When she was twenty-five, her relatives decided to breed her.

At this time, the Ahara were the second most powerful lineage in the world, and this young woman came from a line that produced really fine children. The Ahara wanted to breed her with someone important. They looked around, and who did they see? Eh Manhata, who was the greatest warrior of the age. His lineage, the Eh, stood in front of everyone else. They had no equal. Only the Ahara came close.

So the young woman's relatives entered into negotiations with the senior women of Eh.

Eyes-of-Crystal knew about this, but paid as little attention as possible. She had never wanted to be a mother, but she had always known that she had no choice. At times, she wished that she had come from a less excellent line. If only there had been something wrong or unhealthy about her immediate family! Maybe then she would have been left alone.

But her brothers and male first cousins were sturdy fighters. Her sisters and female first cousins were producing babies like furry butter balls. Every relative was co-operative, moral, intelligent, and well-put-together.

What a curse! thought Eyes-of-Crystal, and went back down to the river to hunt. There, in the dark forest of the flood plain, she found a

(1) Literally, "of a good thread within the woven cord."

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kind of peace. Often, she found animals as well and brought them home, dead and bloody, across the back of her well-trained *tsin*.

After a while, her mother called her in for a conference. One of her uncles was there as well, her mother's full brother, a soldier of middle age with a great scar across his face and one eye missing.

"You know that we have been speaking with the Eh," her mother said. "We wanted Eh Manhata as the father of your child."

"Yes," said Eyes-of-Crystal. "I know this."

"He is not available," her mother said. "According to the Eh, they can't afford to take him out of the current war and send him here."

"There may be more going on than we can see," her uncle added. "I have never heard of Eh Manhata fathering any children, even in those periods when the war has slowed down."

Her mother's head tilted in the gesture that can mean either agreement or consideration. "There are men, even great men, who are not able to father children for one reason or another."

Eye-of-Crystal knew the reasons, of course. The People do not enjoy thinking about the unpleasant aspects of life, any more than humans do. But if a thing is unavoidable, then it must be looked at, and they have never misled their children about what was involved in producing the next generation.

Some men were infertile, and others were impotent. These were physical problems, and comparatively rare. The most common problem was one that humans would call psychological, and the People would say was moral or spiritual. There were men who simply could not overcome their natural aversion to sex with women. They were fine with other men, but put them in a breeding situation and nothing happened. (2)

"They have offered us Manhata's full brother," her mother said. "He has fathered a number of children, and most of them look good. Your uncle has met him, which is why I asked him to be present at this conference."

"They are twins," her uncle said. "When they came out into the world, Manhata was already bigger and stronger. He has always been quicker and more forceful than his brother. There are people who say he took something from his brother in the womb. I wouldn't be surprised."

"This doesn't sound promising," Eyes-of-Crystal said.

"There's nothing wrong with Eh Shawin. He looks very much like Eh Manhata, though he isn't as tall or broad, and something is missing, as I said before. Manhata is like a man in sunlight. No one can overlook him. Shawin is a man at the edge of a forest, in shadow and not entirely

(2) Literally, "nothing came forward." The *double entendre* is in the original.

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visible. But he's a good soldier, and no one has ever questioned his courage or intelligence. And he is Eh Manhata's only full brother."

"No mating can tie us closer to Eh than this one," her mother said. "And no lineage is more important to us. If we're lucky, some of Manhata's qualities will show up in your child or children."

"You want me to do this," Eyes-of-Crystal said.

Her mother said, "Yes."

She agreed. A message was sent to Eh. Eyes-of-Crystal took her bow and went down along the river to shoot birds.

This happened in the late spring. Eh Shawin did not arrive until midsummer. He came alone, which was not surprising. The road from Eh to Ahara was usually safe, and his brother was leading a campaign in the north against the Alliance of the Five Less One. All his male relatives would be there. In peaceful times, of course, they would have ridden with him and made rude jokes about heterosexuality. It is always the job of one's own male relatives to demoralize, while the men of the other lineage are required to be friendly and encouraging.

In any case, Shawin appeared alone at the gate of Ahara Tsal. The guards asked him to wait and sent a messenger ahead. There was time for her family to gather in the courtyard of their great house: her mother, her aunts, the older female cousins, and the two men who were not at war.

Eyes-of-Crystal was on a balcony. There are rules and courtesies in a proper mating. One does not meet the man right off. But there was nothing wrong in watching, as she did.

He rode in. His animal was dusty and tired, but had a good shape, with powerful haunches and shoulders, and a wide head that might indicate intelligence. It was solid brown, a rare and expensive color.

The man was as dusty as the *tsin*, and dressed like an ordinary soldier. But he swung down gracefully, and once he was on the ground, she could see that he was tall, standing eye to eye with her mother, and looming over the two old men, as they came forward to welcome him.

All the rituals of greeting were performed. It seemed to her that Shawin moved through them with unusual precision and grace, like the traveling actors she had seen now and then. They came to Ahara Tsal and set up their stage in the main square. There they danced and told the stories of heroes. It had occurred to her as a child that she wanted to be two things: a soldier or an actor. Both were impossible.

One of her sisters was on the balcony with Eyes-of-Crystal. She looked down at the man in the courtyard and said, "He isn't much to look at, is he?"

Eyes-of-Crystal held her tongue, though there was plenty she could have said. The sister had mated for the first time with a son of Merin, a

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beautiful man who liked fine clothing and jewelry. His eyes had been blue-green, the color of malachite. His manners had been good enough, especially at first. But it had taken her sister a long time to get pregnant, and the man became obviously restless. He was anxious to get back to the war and to his lover, the men of Ahara said.

When he learned that the sister was finally pregnant, he let out a shout of joy, and he left as soon as he decently could.

Eyes-of-Crystal mentioned none of this. For one thing, the sister was still pregnant, and with twins, if her size was any indication. Discomfort had ruined the woman's usually good disposition, and it was never a good idea to criticize the father of an unborn child.

Eyes-of-Crystal kept her lips firmly closed over the *hwarhath* proverb which means, "handsome is as handsome does."

The next day, she was introduced to the man. He'd taken a bath and put on a new kilt, covered with embroidery. The grip of his sword was white bone bound with rings of gold. His fur was brushed and glossy.

That was as much as she learned about him. Their meeting was formal and brief. The words they spoke to each other were set by tradition. When they had finished, her great uncles led Eh Shawin off to meet with other men. She went off with her female relatives.

For the most part, today's *hwarhath* would prefer not to think about what their ancestors had to go through, before the development of artificial insemination. But the information is there if you want to look for it, and the author of this story clearly did her research.

Remember that heterosexuality was—and is—frightening to the People. In it lies the power of generation and destruction. They know—and have always known—that the survival of their society depends on keeping men and women apart. But through most of their history, the survival of their society also depended on mating.

They did what humans also do, when faced with something frightening and unavoidable: death, for example, birth, or marriage. They used ritual to protect the act and limit it, and to direct its power. They used humor and drugs to diminish their fear.

Eh Shawin spent the day with the men of Ahara, talking and getting a little drunk. Eyes-of-Crystal spent the day getting ready for the night, and the author of the story describes every detail: the ritual bath, the ceremonies of protection, the comic skits performed by female cousins, the elaborate mating robe.

Most likely, there is an element of malice in all this description. "Look, look," the author is saying to her readers. "This is what you are trying to forget. This is where we came from. It's as inescapable as shit."

Finally, at nightfall, Eyes-of-Crystal was led up to the mating chamber: a large circular room high in a tower. Most of the space was filled

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by a bed, its wooden frame elaborately carved. Two chairs stood by a window. A lamp burned on the table between them. Eyes-of-Crystal sat down. Her robe was stiff with embroidery. There was no way to relax. She had been given a potion, so the bed did not frighten her. Her relatives fussed around, straightening the cover on the bed, trimming the wick on the lamp, offering good advice.

Finally, there was the sound of male voices, mostly drunk, at the bottom of the tower. The women grew silent. Eyes-of-Crystal heard footsteps on the stairs: one person only, climbing steadily. The others had stayed behind, as was proper. One fellow kept shouting, "Good luck!"

A couple of the women whispered angrily. This was a serious—a sacred—business, and it ought to be carried forward with gravity. A little bit of something to drink did no harm. But men never knew when to stop. Any excuse for a drinking party!

The door opened, and there Eh Shawin was. A torch shone in back of him, so he was edged with red and yellow light. A moment later, he was in the room, standing in the shadow along the curving wall.

The women left. Several of them touched Eyes-of-Crystal as they passed her, but no one spoke. There was only the rustle of clothing, the slap of sandals on the bare stone floor, and the breathing of an especially large and solid aunt as she went down the winding stairs. Last to go was Eyes-of-Crystal's mother.

Eh Shawin closed the door, came over, and sat down in the chair across from Eyes-of-Crystal. Now she was frightened, in spite of the potion. He leaned forward and looked at her, frowning. "They have drugged you."

"Yes."

He sighed. "The first night is always like this. I'm going to tell you something, Ahara Pai, though I don't know if you'll be able to understand it at the moment. Still, I believe in acting directly (3) and in saying what's in my mind.

"There are many families who want to interbreed with Eh, and all of them are interested in having my brother as a father. But, as you probably know, our lineage cannot let him leave the field of battle.

"Because I'm Eh Manhata's twin, I've been sent on trips like this—" He paused. "More times than I can remember. I know far more about this situation than is usual for a man, and I have formed my own opinions about how to go about producing children." Eyes-of-Crystal would have been shocked, if she had been sober. Thanks to the potion, she remained calm.

(3) Literally, "with *katiad*." This is the most important male virtue. If a man has it, he is steadfast, forthright, honest, and sincere. He travels like an arrow that is well-made and well-shot, straight to the target.

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"These drugs and rituals do nothing good! The woman is frightened, and the man *would* be, if he wasn't drunk, as he usually is. It's surprising he remembers what it is he has to do!

"In my opinion, everything goes best if the two people are sober, and comfortable with one another. The women seems to get pregnant more quickly, and it's my impression that the child turns out better. And so I have developed my own way of doing this. I try to make it as ordinary as possible."

"Do your female relatives let you have these opinions?" asked Eyes-of-Crystal. "It seems odd."

He glanced up and smiled briefly. "Remember that they've known me from childhood. Eh Manhata is fierce. *I* am stubborn."

He changed the subject then, and asked her about hunting. The men of Ahara had told him that she liked to hunt. It was an unusual trait in a woman, but not wrong or shameful. His home was on the plain. He knew what it was like to chase game over flat land and along the little rivers of his country. What was the great river like for hunting?

She tried to answer him, but she was frightened, and the drug made it hard for her to think and speak. Her mind kept coming back to the present situation, though with decreasing fear. For one thing, his questions were so ordinary. For another, the drug was making her sleepy. Her thoughts moved more and more slowly, like people wading through a heavy fall of snow.

"Maybe we should have this conversation another time," Eh Shawin said finally. He paused, then continued, his voice quiet and gentle. "There is one thing I have never been able to change. Your relatives and mine have expectations about what will happen tonight. We must meet those expectations." He paused again.

"I can do the thing slowly and try to find some way to make it pleasant for you, or I can do it quickly and get it over."

"Quickly," said Eyes-of-Crystal.

Eh Shawin inclined his head in the motion of agreement, then asked if she wanted light or darkness.

"Darkness," said Eyes-of-Crystal.

He licked his fingers and put out the lamp.

The home world of the People has no moon, but the stars are brilliant, and the People have much better night vision than humans. Most likely, the man and woman could see each other as they undressed. Maybe their eyes gleamed occasionally, reflecting starlight. Their dark solid bodies must certainly have been visible, as they moved past the star-filled windows or settled on the bed, which was covered with a mating blanket of bleached fabric as white as snow or bone.

The author of the story does not tell us any of this, though she describes

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their mating with clinical detail. Most likely, she was working from the old mating manuals, which are still available in libraries, though not (of course) in sections that children can access. There is no reason to believe that she is writing from personal experience.

After they finished, the man went to sleep. Eyes-of-Crystal lay next to him, looking out a window at the sky. She could see the Banner of the Goddess, the Milky Way.

What had the Goddess been *thinking* of, when she devised this method for making people? It was like a great ugly knot in the net of kinship and cooperation and love that held all of them—women and men, adults and children—together. Impossible to understand!

She woke in the morning and found Eh Shawin gone, though she could see the place where he'd lain. Her body hurt. She got up groaning and went down to the women's bathroom. There was hot water ready, and a cousin to help her.

Hah! It was good to wash and then to soak in a tub of clean water scented with herbs. The cousin was middle-aged, but had never been bred. One of her feet was twisted. It had been that way from birth, and this was not a trait that the Ahara wanted continued. She barely spoke to Eyes-of-Crystal, either out of envy or embarrassment.

At last, Eyes-of-Crystal got out of the tub and rubbed herself dry. The cousin brought a fresh new tunic. She put it on. Her female relatives would be waiting for her in the eating room and the kitchen. She had no wish to see them. Eyes-of-Crystal thanked her cousin and went out to the stables.

Light slanted in the little high windows. The air smelled of hay and *tsina*. Most of the stalls were empty, the animals gone to war. But a few remained: the mares and geldings that children rode, and her own hunters. She went to look at her favorite, a blue-grey stallion. His legs and hind quarters had white stripes, and his horns were as black as obsidian.

Eh Shawin stood at the end of the stall. "A fine animal," he said. "What do you call him?"

"Direct Action."

"A good name. I talked to your mother this morning and explained that I don't want to inconvenience your male relatives. There are so few home at present, and most are so old! They don't have the energy to be entertaining a guest. And I do best in these situations if I keep regular hours and maintain my ordinary habits. So—" he glanced up briefly and smiled. "Your mother has agreed that it makes better sense for me to go out riding with you. I get the exercise I need, and the old men of Ahara get their rest."

It wasn't like her mother to agree to anything unusual, but Shawin

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was clever and plausible. There are men who know how to charm women, just as there are men who know how to charm men. These two qualities don't usually come together in one person. Eyes-of-Crystal had the impression that Eh Shawin was no exception to this rule. Her male relatives did not dislike the man, but it wasn't likely they'd go out of the way for him.

"My *tsin* hasn't recovered from our journey as yet, but one of your cousins has offered me this animal." He led her to another stall.

She knew the animal there: a large gelding. Its color was solid purple-brown.

"He told me its name is Consistent Behavior, which sounds promising, though I'm curious why an animal this color was gelded."

She knew and told him. The animal had a sullen disposition. This wasn't a problem for riding. "Unless you want to go quickly." But Consistent Behavior was no good for hunting, and the animal would have been dangerous in a war.

Eh Shawin laughed.

"My cousin meant no discourtesy. You see how little we have available." She gestured around at the empty stalls.

"I don't take offense easily. That's my brother."

They saddled and rode out. The author of this story is anonymous, but she almost certainly came from one of the lineages along the river, maybe from Ahara. Her description of the country is detailed, and it reads like a real experience, not something she got out of a book.

They went east, along a narrow trail that led past fields of *hwal* and *antim*. The sky was clear, except for a handful of high clouds, and the air smelled of dust and dry vegetation. Small bugs filled the weeds along the trail. The names of the bugs are given: sunfly, hopper, *pirig*, *heln*, and scarlet warrior.

Eh Shawin asked about hunting a second time.

Eyes-of-Crystal told him about the many fine animals and birds to be found in the marshes along the river Tsal and in the flood plain forest.

It was obvious that he knew about hunting. The questions he asked were intelligent. But he had never spent much time around water. She told him about the giant fish that lived in the river. They were longer than a man, and had teeth like knives. Their dispositions were nasty. Her people hunted them with nets and spears.

"That must be something!" Eh Shawin said and then exhaled loudly. They had come to the top of the bluffs. In front of them was the river valley, wide and deep, full of many channels that wound through the forest and marshland, so that the entire valley was like a belt made of strips of colored leather woven together: green, blue-green, brown, and pale red.

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The two of them dismounted and let their animals graze. They spoke more about hunting. He reached over and stroked her shoulder, the way a female lover might. Eyes-of-Crystal frowned. After a moment, he took his hand away and leaned back till he was lying full-length on the stony ground, his hands forming a resting place for his head.

Now she was made uneasy by his silence. "What is your brother like?" she asked.

He glanced at her. In the bright sunlight, his pupils had contracted to lines she could not see. His eyes were like windows onto an empty blue sky.

"That's a question I've heard before. 'Tell us about Eh Manhata, Eh Shawin.' "

"Does it make you angry to be asked?"

"No. It's always been obvious that he was something special, even when we were children. Everyone knew that if he lived to be a man, he would be either a hero or a monster.

"He is fierce and without fear, commanding, strong, clever about war. No one can match him as a leader in battle. So long as he's alive, our lineage will always win.

"He loves our mother and our female relatives, and he never acts without consulting them—except on the battlefield, of course. He is loyal to Eh. He respects the Goddess."

He stopped talking. There was no noise except bugs singing in the vegetation.

"I know all this," said Eyes-of-Crystal.

"Then you know Eh Manhata." The man sat up. "Let's ride more."

That day they stayed on the plain above the river. In the afternoon, they returned to Ahara Tsal. At night, they mated again in the tower room. It was as unpleasant as the first time, but she didn't lie awake for as long afterward.

The weather remained hot and dry: good late summer weather. They got in the habit of going out almost every day. Eyes-of-Crystal showed the man of Eh her country: the cultivated fields, the marshes and forest. They hunted the animals available in that season, before the fall migrations began. The man was a good companion: patient, observant, respectful of her skill and knowledge, unmoved by violence and death.

She liked him, though she had never expected to like a man who was not a close relative, and though he did things that made her uneasy.

One afternoon, Eyes-of-Crystal shot a *ral* (4) in the marshes along the

(4) This is a marsh-dwelling quadruped herbivore. Its body is like a small antelope or deer except for the broad three-toed feet. Its head is surprisingly large, and looks as if it might belong to a refined wart hog. The males have tusks. Both sexes have little piggy eyes and large mobile ears which are striped lavender and pale yellow inside. Their backs are dull red, almost the same color as the dominant vegetation of the marshes. Their rumps are yellow,

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river. The animal went down, but it wasn't dead. It struggled to rise, making a bleating noise. Eh Shawin was the one who dismounted and cut its throat. As he stuck his knife in, the *ral* jerked and twisted its neck. Blood spurted onto his clothing, and he made the hissing sound that indicates anger or disgust. He finished killing the *ral,* then pulled off his tunic and sank it in a pool of water. Naked, he eviscerated the animal. She had never seen an adult man without clothing. It made her uncomfortable.

She kept herself busy with the *tsina.* Her Direct Action was not troubled by the scent of blood, but the animal that Shawin was riding—a young stallion that she had not finished training yet—was fidgety. He might try to run.

When Shawin had finished, he waded into the water and washed himself, then the tunic.

"Put that on," she said when he came back to shore.

"Wet? No."

"I don't like this."

For a moment he said nothing, but concentrated on wringing out the tunic. Then he glanced up briefly. "There's no one here except the two of us, and we have been spending every night in the same bed, neither of us wearing anything. Do you really think we need to be formal?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you ought to go on ahead," Eh Shawin said. "You'll have to take the *ral.* My *tsin* isn't going to be willing to carry it."

She did as he suggested and rode home alone, troubled by the memory of him, his fur slicked down by the water and his body evident. He was rangy, with large bones and long muscles, narrow everywhere except through the shoulders. Made for speed rather than endurance, Eyes-of-Crystal thought. In a way beautiful, though not with the sleek beauty of a woman.(5)

He ought to be more modest. He had not seemed especially bothered by the fact that he was naked. Maybe he had spent too much time fulfilling mating contracts. It had become ordinary for him to be around women who were not relatives and to do things with them that most men did only once or twice in their lives.

That evening, in the tower room, she asked about his behavior.

"If I hadn't washed the tunic right away, the stain would have sunk in, and I like that tunic. It's almost new, and I don't know if you noticed,

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except around the anus, where there is a circular area that is entirely hairless. The bare skin is bright pink.

(5) The build described here is not typical of male *hwarhath,* who tend to be solid, with torsos that go straight up and down. The author is giving us a male protagonist who is a bit odd and humanish in appearance.

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but the embroidery over the shoulders is really fine. I shouldn't have worn it for hunting. I wasn't expecting to make quite so big a mess."

"Are you this way in battle?" she asked. "Fastidious?"

"No. Of course not. Though I never like it when something good is ruined: a piece of clothing, a weapon. But I don't think about that till later. In battle, there are only two things on my mind: staying alive and following my brother's orders."

There was something in his voice when he spoke about his brother that troubled her. "Do you like him?"

Eh Shawin glanced up. The room was dark except for a single lantern, flickering on the table between them, and his pupils had expanded to wide black bars. "Manhata? What a question to ask!" He licked his fingers and put out the light.

One of her cousins was home from the war while an injury to his leg healed. By this time, he was starting to hobble around, and he asked Eh Shawin to practice fighting with him. This was something women were not supposed to watch, but Eyes-of-Crystal climbed onto a roof that overlooked the fighting ground. The two men used swords, the long heavy kind that had only one purpose. No man ever carried a weapon like that unless he was going to war. Eh Shawin handled his sword with ease. He was obviously a better fighter than her cousin, and this was not due simply to her cousin's injury. He was as quick as she had expected, and strong as well. Lovely to watch, the woman thought as she crouched on the roof tiles. If she had a son, this quickness and strength would be useful. If she had a daughter, maybe the child would get Eh Shawin's discipline. With luck, his oddness would not be transmitted.

Her time for bleeding came. So did the blood. She wasn't pregnant. She stayed away from him for several nights, as was customary.

"That tells me I have another forty days here," Eh Shawin said. "I'm not sorry, though I have to say that your male relatives are boring. But I like you, and my lineage does not have another breeding contract that requires me. Once you're pregnant, I'll have to rejoin the army."

"You don't like the war."

"It's been going on a long time. After a while, everything seems as if it's happened before. There are only so many ways to kill and die. Even my brother has not managed to find much that is new in those areas."

"You are very peculiar," said Eyes-of-Crystal. "I hope it doesn't come out in your children."

He laughed. "No one has complained to my female relatives."

This conversation look place atop a river bluff. They ended here often, for Eh Shawin shared her love of the wide river valley. The foliage was getting its autumn colors; and the river was dark brown like weathered bronze, except where it reflected the forest or the sky. Everything seemed

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to be shifting and changing. She looked out and thought of traveling, like a tree floating in the water or a bird rising on the wind.

Maybe when this was over, and she was pregnant, she would go to visit another town. There were several lineages nearby that were closely tied to Ahara. She had relatives, women who had been fathered by men of her lineage. She even had a former lover, a woman of Shulnowa. They had met at a festival and visited back and forth, and then the war grew dangerous for a time, and they exchanged tokens and messages instead. That ended finally. But maybe she could go to Shulnowa and visit one of her minor cousins. Maybe she would meet the lover. How could she avoid it in a town that size?

Eh Shawin ran a hand down her arm, stroking the fur. "I think I'd like to have sex right now."

"Here? In the sunlight?"

"We aren't getting anywhere by having sex in the dark."

Her bleeding had stopped the day before, so it was possible, though it seemed wrong. She tried to remember some rule that forbade sex outdoors or while the sun was up. Nothing came to mind, and she had done such things with her lover. But that had been at festivals, and with a woman. Surely sex for procreation ought to be done in a less carefree manner.

He leaned over and kissed the rim of her ear, then touched his tongue to the bare skin inside.

They had sex on the river bluff in a meadow of dry plants. A group of hunting birds soared overhead. At one point, early on, she looked up and saw them, rising in a wide circle. Later, she found she had become preoccupied. The bright open world seemed to darken and turn in upon itself, and she was not aware of much except her body and Eh Shawin's body.

When they had finished, they lay a while together, listening to bugs sing around them. The birds had gone. Finally, Eh Shawin yawned and sat up. "That's something I haven't done before." He grinned at her. "There's more variety in sex than in war, in my opinion, anyway."

They got up and brushed each other off, then put on their clothing and went to find their *tsina*.

After that, they got in the habit of having sex beyond the town walls. It was the right time of year. The ground was dry, and the biting and burrowing bugs had mostly vanished. Now and then, there was some kind of distraction: a *tsin* would come close while grazing. Once, a fat little *tli* came up to see what they were doing. It stopped just outside reach and reared up on its hind legs, folding its paws against the white fur of its chest.

"Fill your eyes, little trickster," said Eh Shawin.

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The animal seemed to listen. It tilted its head and watched them until they were done. Then, as they moved apart, it moved away.

They still slept in the tower room. By now, she had gotten used to sharing a bed with him. His scent was familiar, and it was comforting to lie against his broad back. Every few days, her mother would ask how everything was going.

"Fine," she would answer. Finally, she said, "I think I'm like my sister."

Her mother frowned. "In that case, we'll have the man with us all winter. I suppose I shouldn't complain. It gives your cousin someone to practice fighting with."

One morning she woke early and heard the cries of birds as they flew over Ahara Tsal. The fall migrations were beginning. There would be good hunting in the marshes along the river. She prodded Eh Shawin. Half awake, he agreed to go into the valley with her. After breakfast, they saddled their *tsina*.

The morning air was cool, and thin banners of mist floated over the surface of the river. The mist would be gone in less than an *ikun*, and the day would be hot by noon. But at the moment she could feel the sharp edge of autumn. She carried her strung bow. Her quiver hung from her saddle. Eh Shawin had brought a pair of throwing spears. He wasn't really in the mood to kill anything, he told her. "But a ride is fine. I can watch you shoot down birds. And if we encounter anything large, I'll be ready."

There were plenty of animals in the valley, but she didn't see the birds she wanted: the ones she had heard as they flew over. She and Eh Shawin kept going, following a road that wasn't much used. Midway through the morning, two men appeared ahead of them, riding *tsina*. They came out of the underbrush and reined their animals, blocking the road. One had a shield on his arm.

Eh Shawin had been riding in back of her. Now he came up alongside. There was a spear in his hand. "Let me take care of this." She reined Direct Action, and he moved past her. He was riding her young stallion, Hope-for-the-Future.

The two men turned their animals so they were facing Shawin, and one drew a sword, a long weapon of war.

Something made a noise in back of her. She glanced around: two more men came riding toward her. They looked like soldiers who had gone to hell: ragged and dirty. One man wore a metal helmet. The other wore a leather cap. They both held battle-swords.

She glanced back at Shawin. He'd thrown his spear, and one of the men in front was falling, shouting as he slid onto the ground. The spear was in his chest.

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Shawin pulled the second spear from its holder.

The two ragged soldiers came up on either side of her. One glanced over. "We're sorry that this has to happen in front of you, but—as you can see—we're desperate. It will be over quickly." Then they rode on. Direct Action shook his head. She tightened the reins. There was nothing she could do.

Among the *hwarhath,* warfare is entirely a male activity. The *hwarhath* men direct their violence exclusively toward each other. They do no physical harm to women and children, strange as this may sound to humans. But there is a *quid pro quo.* The *hwarhath* teach their women that they must never fight. Eyes-of-Crystal knew that she was almost certainly safe. Unless these men were crazy, they would not touch her. But Eh Shawin was going to die, and all the rules of right behavior told her that she had to look on. This was the way it had always been done.

The man of Eh glanced back. He must have seen the two new soldiers. A moment later, he was charging at the man in front of him, spear in hand. Their *tsina* met. Her young stallion screamed, and a man shouted, she didn't know which one. They were tangled together, their animals turning in a circle. The other bandits reined, as if they were trying to see a good way to attack.

There was no way for Eh Shawin to win. His animal was untried. He didn't have the right kind of weapons, only a hunting spear and a sword that was little more than a dagger. As ignorant as she was, she knew this was a bad situation. Finally, he was outnumbered. Her male relatives did not speak much about war, but she had heard them say, "As a general rule, big wins over little, and many over few."

Eyes-of-Crystal pulled an arrow from her quiver. She fit it into her bow and pulled back the string. Hah! This was easy! They were much larger than a bird, and hardly moving at all! She let the arrow go. It went into the neck of the man in the leather cap. He screamed, a noise almost like the one made by her young stallion.

The man in the helmet twisted around, a look of horror on his face. "No!" he shouted.

Her second arrow went into his chest, and her third into his throat. The man in the helmet fell, making no further sound. One foot stayed caught in its stirrup; the man ended on the ground with one leg up. His *tsin* was thin and needed a grooming, but evidently it had been well-trained. The moment its rider fell, it stopped moving, except to shake its head. Not that it made any difference. The rider was dead. His *tsin* could have dragged him all the way across the valley and done no further harm.

The man she had shot first, the one in the leather cap, was still on his

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animal, bent over and holding onto the animal's neck. Blood poured down his back.

Beyond these two, Shawin still struggled with the third man. They were on the ground now, though she hadn't seen how this had happened. Their *tsina* danced around them. The men were entangled. Eyes-of-Crystal could not risk a shot.

She waited, bow in hand. The struggle ended, and Eh Shawin stood up. His tunic was torn and dirty. He held his little sword. The blade was covered with blood.

"That seems to be it," Eh Shawin said.

Eyes-of-Crystal leaned to one side and vomited.

After she finished, Eh Shawin helped her dismount. He was unharmed, except for a few small cuts. "Though I've been beaten like iron on the anvil, and I'll feel it tomorrow. If your relatives think I am going to be good for much of anything the next few days—"

"I killed them," she said.

"Two of the four."

She went on, speaking disjointedly. How could she tell her relatives? What would they do? No woman of the Ahara had ever gotten involved in a battle.

"None that you have ever been told about," Eh Shawin said. He turned and watched the one man still alive. His *tsin* had become nervous finally and begun to step sideways like a harvest dancer. Then it shook its body, and the man slid off and lay motionless on the dusty road.

"I'll pull out the arrow in that fellow's neck and drive in my second spear. It's broken, but no one will know when the breaking happened, and you will have killed only one man then."

That was more than enough, said Eyes-of-Crystal.

He tilted his head in agreement, then walked over to the man he had killed with his short sword. "I killed this fellow, then captured his sword." He bent and picked it up. "And used it to kill the last man with two blows, one to the neck and one to the chest. If I make cuts that are big enough, no one will notice the arrow wounds. So two men have died from my spears, one from my short sword, and one from this." He lifted the battle sword. "What a hero I am! They'll make up poetry about me in Ahara!" He looked at her, meeting her gaze. "And you behaved like a decent woman and watched the fight, never moving a hand."

She spoke again. The story was unlikely. She wasn't a good liar. It would be better to tell the truth.

"If you admit to behavior *this* unusual, your relatives may decide it wasn't a good idea to breed you," Eh Shawin said in answer. "And if you are pregnant already, they might decide to kill the child. Then all my hard work will have been wasted. I'd prefer that my children live, unless

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they are damaged in some way." He looked up at her. "And I'd prefer that *your* life be happy. It isn't likely to be, if you admit to violence. Lie to the best of your ability. That ought to be sufficient. Remember what you have just seen! If you're upset and don't make a lot of sense, your family will understand.

"And while it's unlikely that I could kill four men, my brother has done as much and more. Maybe I had—for once—his determination and power."

She agreed finally, and he did as he had planned, like a manager setting up the opening of a play. Bloodflies had begun to gather, their bodies shining like sparks of fire in the hazy sunlight. He ignored them, cutting the arrow from the one man with his hunting knife. He worked deftly, making the wound only a little larger, then drove in the broken spear, grunting with the effort. Then he moved on to her second victim, and used the borrowed battle sword to slash new wounds. The bloodflies hummed around him and crawled on dead men.

A play would begin with the corpses lying on the stage, looking far more splendid than these fellows. One by one, the corpses would rise, turning into handsome warriors, who would explain to the audience how they came to be in their present situation, acting out the quarrels and moral dilemmas that led to death.

Let nothing like that happen *here,* said Eyes-of-Crystal to the Goddess.

At last, Eh Shawin was done preparing the stage. He gathered the men's weapons and loaded them on their *tsina,* then tied the animals to a lead and gave the lead to her. They mounted and rode back toward Ahara Tsal.

They stopped once by a stream. Eh Shawin washed her arrows, which he had kept, then handed them to her.

"I don't want these."

"I don't want them to be found anywhere close to the place where those fellows died. Someone might wonder. And I can't think of a better place to hide arrows than in a quiver. Get rid of them later."

She put them in her quiver, and they went on.

Hah! It was an event when they arrived at the town, leading four animals, Eh Shawin covered with blood. He did most of the talking, while her relatives comforted her.

Male relatives saddled their *tsina* and rode to find the bodies, led by Shawin. He was fine, he said. A little tired and sore. But he would have no trouble riding back into the valley. The men of Ahara gave him sideways glances that indicated respect.

Her female relatives gave her a bath and put her to bed. After a while, she went to sleep, waking in the middle of the night.

Shawin was settling into bed next to her. She spoke his name.

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He said, "We followed their trail back for a distance. There were only the four of them. Bandits, your kinfolk say. Men without a lineage. The world is full of people like that these days. They must have wanted to rob me. The Goddess knows their animals are in bad condition, and they had nothing of value except their battle swords. Hah! To end like that!" Then he went to sleep.

She stayed awake. He had bathed, and he smelled of clean fur and aromatic soap. She found the odor comforting. All at once, she was unwilling to have him leave.

What lay in front of her, after he was gone? Being pregnant and then nursing a child. Then, maybe, if she could convince her relatives that she had no interest in children, she would be free for a while. That happened sometimes. There were woman who could not manage to get interested in motherhood. Other women raised the children they bore.

But if the child turned out well, they would breed her again, maybe to someone like the son of Merin who had fathered her sister's just born child.

And all the while, she would have the secret of her violence in her mind. What if her child was a girl? The trait might be transmitted. She might begin a line of female monsters!

As might be expected, she did not sleep any more that night. In the morning, she was queasy and threw up. Not a good sign, the woman thought.

But the next day, she was fine; and the day after, she and Eh Shawin went riding, though not down into the river valley. Instead, they wandered among the fields, now mostly harvested, and went up onto the bluff to their favorite place. They dismounted and sat a while, watching the hunting birds that soared over the valley, circling and chasing one another, not out of anger or from a need to mate, but only (the old women said) for pleasure, from joy in their skill.

Finally, Eyes-of-Crystal began to speak. She had not been able to shake off her feeling of horror at what she had done, and she did not like to think of living her life with a secret like this one.

"You are not the only person with a secret," Eh Shawin told her gently.

"Not like this," she answered. "And it isn't my secret alone. You know it also."

"I'm not going to tell, dear one."

She glanced at him, surprised. He had used a term that belonged to a lover.

He was lying comfortably full-length on the ground, his eyes half closed, his hands folded over his belly. "You are young enough to think that people are the way they appear from the front, and that they *ought*

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to be so. What am I? A loyal son of Eh, who carries out an embarrassing obligation as I am told to by the senior women of my lineage?"

"I don't know *what* to think of you," said Eyes-of-Crystal.

"I have never been much interested in sex with men. That is one thing I have in common with my brother, though we differ in our attitude toward sex with women. The idea repels him so much that he has always refused to carry out any breeding contract. I *like* what I do, though my attitude toward the individual women varies. Still, none of them has ever been stupid, and all of them are in good physical condition."

He smiled at her. "Our lineage has been lucky. They have one son who wants to spend his entire life fighting and killing, which has been very useful, and another son—the twin of Eh Manhata—who is willing to put the same kind of effort into *mating*.

"And I have been lucky. If my brother had been ordinary, I would have spent my life having no sex or sex with men, or I would have become a pervert, sneaking after women. Such men exist, though they are not common, even in this age where everything seems to be unraveling.

"Instead, I am here with you, for which I thank the Goddess and Manhata."

She couldn't think of what to say. They were *both* monsters, though in different ways. She had acted in a way that no woman ever should, though she had been unwilling and was now remorseful. His actions were proper. He had done as his female relatives had told him. But his thoughts and feelings were perverse.

"What kind of child is going to come from this mating?" she asked finally.

"I don't know," said Eh Shawin. "But the passing on of traits is not a simple process, as we know from breeding animals as well as people, and we both have many good traits. I think it's likely that the child will be fine."

She looked out at the river valley, then up at the birds, still soaring over the bluffs. A crazy idea came into her mind, and she told it to Eh Shawin.

Why couldn't they go off together? The world was full of people who wandered, having lost their homes in the long war. She could disguise herself as a man. Such things were possible. The actors who came to Ahara Tsal played women convincingly. Or else they could claim to be relatives, a brother and sister. She would not have to hide the person she was from the rest of her family. If the child turned out badly, at least it would not be one of the Ahara. He would not have to go back to the war.

He listened to her patiently. When she finished, he said, "How would we earn a living? I have only two skills, fighting and making women

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pregnant. The second one would be useless, if I didn't belong to a powerful lineage. As for the first skill, I don't want to become a bandit like those men in the valley."

They could hunt, said Eyes-of-Crystal.

"And live like animals in the wilderness?"

They could sell whatever they didn't need, meat and fur.

"Most land is held by some lineage or other. Do you think they'll give us permission to hunt? Do you think people will refrain from asking questions, if we bring the hides of animals into a town? I'd be executed as a thief, and you would be sent off to survive as best you could. Most likely, someone would take you in. Even in this age of unraveling, there are people who will not let a woman come to harm. But you would not be the daughter of a famous lineage, and you would not be loved as you are here. And if there were more children, what would happen to them? I don't want my children to be beggars."

"Is there nothing we can do?" asked Eyes-of-Crystal.

"What we're doing," said Eh Shawin.

After that, she was silent, watching the birds.

It was midwinter before her relatives were certain that she was pregnant. The snow was deep by then, and the winter unusually cold. Eh Shawin stayed on till spring, though she no longer spent time with him. She saw him, now and then, at a distance.

When the thaw was over and roads comparatively dry, he rode off with a group of her male relatives who were returning to the war. She was sick that day and did not see him go.

The children were born at harvest time: two boys, large and sturdy. The older became Tsu, which was an old name among the Ahara. The younger became Ehrit, which means "deriving from Eh."

She nursed them for a year, as was customary in those days, then turned them over to one of her sisters and went back to her old habits. But hunting interested her less than it had. She missed having company, and she felt less safe than before. What if other bandits came into the river valley? Would she become violent again? Would they become violent?

Gradually, she became more like other women, though she never became entirely ordinary. She remained more solitary than was usual, and she did not lose her fondness for riding. Now she followed the trails that went through cultivated land, and she kept her eye on the fields and pastures. When she took out a weapon, it was usually to deal with some wild animal that was doing harm to her family's herds and crops.

And though she was not especially maternal, she wasn't able to leave her twins entirely in the hands of her female relatives. Maybe if they had been ordinary, she would have been able to ignore them. But they were clever and active and clearly in front of most other children.

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When they were two years old, her family bred her again. This time the man came from one of the small lineages that existed at the edges of Ahara. (6) He was solid and handsome, with a fine glossy coat, and he did what he was asked to do with determination and competence. But he was obviously embarrassed, and it was clear that he preferred to spend his time with her male relatives. Eyes-of-Crystal felt disappointed, though this didn't make any sense. The man behaved exactly as he was supposed to, and he was never discourteous. She got pregnant almost at once. The child was a girl, who inherited her father's solidity and lovely fur. What about this mating could cause dissatisfaction?

In time, another gift came from this mating: the man's sister, who was as solid and handsome as her brother, and who (unlike him) was comfortable around women. Eyes-of-Crystal met her at a festival, and they fell in love. This was (the author tells us) no ordinary casual bed-friendship.

It's important, at this point, to realize that the *hwarhath* tend to see women as less romantic and more promiscuous than men. Living on the perimeter, men have time and opportunity for love. But the women live at the center of the family, surrounded by relatives, and their strongest ties are usually with kin. For women, sexual love tends to be a matter of brief couplings at festivals, or long-term long-distance romances where the two lovers visit back and forth, but are more often apart than together.

Occasionally, female lovers will move in together, and this has happened much more often in modern times. Conservatives see it as yet another example of how society is going to hell in a hand basket. What is going to become of the People, if women languish and hold onto one another like men? Who is going to look out for the family and the children?

In the age of Eh Manhata, this kind of female affection-beyond-the-family was unusual, but it did occasionally happen, and the author of this story, who is determined apparently to break all the ordinary rules of romantic fiction, gives her heroine a lover who is willing to move away from home. The woman was maternal and had no children of her own, the author tells us, and she found Ahara Pai's children more interesting than her nephews and nieces.

It's possible that the lover was added to the story to give it a happy ending. The *hwarhath* insist on happy endings in their romances, though

(6) The old term for families like this was "side-clingers," though the word can also be translated as "shelf fungus" or even "barnacle." They were too small to survive by their own, so became allies of some large and powerful lineage, which chose not to absorb them for various reasons. Most powerful was the need to have a nearby source for breeding and sexual partners. In the area where this story takes place, the incest taboo forbade—and still forbids—sex of any kind within a lineage. As the lineages grew larger and larger, this began to be a problem, which was solved—at least in part—by the accumulation of clingers.

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their idea of a happy ending is not always the same as a human's. Or maybe the author put the lover in to shock and perturb.

Eyes-of-Crystal was bred three more times. Each time the man was different and came from a different lineage. The author gives the names of the lineages, but they would mean nothing to a human reader. Two were important. One was another clinger. The children—two more girls and a boy—were healthy enough to keep, and all of them grew to be promising, though none equaled the twins. The twins were exceptional boys: quick, well-coordinated, intelligent, forceful, good-humored, and charming.

"This is the spirit of Eh Manhata showing," said her female relatives.

No, she thought. The intelligence and good humor came from Eh Shawin. So did the charm, though the boys were able to get what they wanted from both women and men.

Occasionally she heard news about Shawin. Her kinfolk took an interest in him now. His life continued the way he had described it. He was often away from the army, fulfilling contracts his relatives had made. It seemed as if he almost never failed. The children he fathered were strong and healthy. They made it through the dangerous years of childhood with little trouble. His kinsmen began to call him The Progenitor, and this became the nickname that everyone used.

He was less impressive in the war. Not a bad soldier, her male relatives said, but not what they would have expected from Eh Manhata's twin. "Or from the man who killed those four bandits in our valley. Hah! That was an achievement! We still tell people about it! But he has never done anything comparable."

When the twins were fourteen, there was a festival at Taihanin. Eyes-of-Crystal went, along with the other women and enough men to provide protection, though the war had moved to the east by now, and all of Ahara and Eh lay between them and the nearest enemy. Her younger children stayed at home, as did her lover, but the twins were old enough for traveling, and they joined the party.

One evening, they came to a caravanserai. There were people there already: a small group of soldiers from Eh. One of her male cousins went to speak with the soldiers. When he returned, he said, "Eh Shawin is there. I asked him over. He's never met his sons."

Soon the man himself appeared, walking out of the shadows into the light of Ahara's fire. No question that he had gotten older. He was still tall and rangy, but he moved stiffly now. The fur on his shoulders and upper arms had turned pale silver-grey. But when he saw her, he smiled, and his smile was unchanged: brief but affectionate in a way that was not common among men of the People.

She was right, thought Eyes-of-Crystal. The boys got their charm from him.

Her cousin stepped forward and introduced the boys. Eh Shawin looked

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at them. They had shot up in the last year, and it seemed likely that they would be as tall as he was. At the moment, they were thin and as leggy as *tsina* colts. Like colts, they were nervous and shy. They hung back and ducked their heads, unwilling to meet Eh Shawin's gaze, though they gave him many sideways glances. But there is nothing wrong with shyness in young men and boys, and their manners were good. They answered his questions promptly and clearly, Ehrit doing most of the talking, as he always did.

Finally, Shawin ran out of questions. The boys were given leave to go, and he came over to Eyes-of-Crystal. It wasn't required that the two of them talk, but it was permissible.

"You've done a good job," he said.

"My sisters more than I," she said. "And my lover, though I taught the boys to hunt, and that was enjoyable."

He asked if she had other children. She named them and their fathers.

"Your relatives have been keeping you busy," he said.

"Not as busy as the Eh have been keeping you, from what I hear."

He laughed and inclined his head.

They spoke some more about the twins. She praised their qualities, while he looked across the fire. The boys were sprawled on the far side. They had gathered stones and drawn lines in the dirt and were playing a game of strategy. Now and then one or the other would glance up and see Shawin watching, then glance back down.

"So everything has turned out well," Shawin said finally. "You have a lover, and six fine children, and I have my life, which has turned out better than I expected. Hah! I was frightened when I first realized where my sexual interests were likely to lead me.

"I thought our relatives had been wrong. They worried about Manhata becoming a monster. He was always so relentless, and he cared for so few people, and none of them male. But *I* was the one who was the monster. I thought, they will find out and kill me, or I will kill myself. But none of that has happened."

"Have you never wanted a lover?" asked Eyes-of-Crystal.

He glanced at her sideways and smiled. "How could I have one? I'll do what I can for your boys when they join the war, though they aren't going to need much help, being Ahara and having the qualities you describe. But I find it pleasant to do what I can."

They said goodbye, and he walked back to his campfire, pausing on the way to speak again with his sons.

Eh Shawin lived to be almost eighty, and Eyes-of-Crystal reached a hundred, but they never met again, at least so far as the author tells us.

The last part of her story is devoted to the twins, who grew up to be fine soldiers and famous men. When Eh Manhata died at the age of eighty-five, betrayed and murdered by men he trusted, it seemed as if the alliance he had created would be destroyed. It was Ahara Ehrit who

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held everything together, not through violence, but through negotiation. He was helped (he said) by the fact that the world was full of the children of Eh Shawin. Often, when he met with other lineages, he found that he was talking to a half-brother. And there were certain traits that appeared over and over in Shawin's children. They were reasonable, flexible, good-humored, and willing to make the best of the situation. If they had to, they could fight, but it wasn't their preferred way to solve problems.

Ehrit is known to history as The Negotiator or The Weaver. Eh Manhata began the alliance that finally became the world government, but Ahara Ehrit saved it.

His brother Tsu was better at warfare, and this also was useful to the alliance. He was among the best generals of his generation, though no one in that generation could equal Eh Manhata. Still, Ahara Tsu won most of the battles he fought. His nickname was the Sword of Ahara. In the opinion of Ehrit, his qualities came from their mother. He was more courageous than was typical of the children of Eh Shawin, more relentless, more disciplined, more bloody-minded, and more bent on going his own way, though he always listened to Ehrit, and discipline and loyalty kept him from doing anything seriously off to the side.

Neither of them inherited Eh Manhata's great force of character. But the new age did not need this quality. They both had lovers, men who stayed with them for years, and though both of them fathered children, so far as is known they did so without pleasure. ●

Note on the Translation:

In its upper course the river Tsal is confined by high bluffs of sandstone and limestone, but further to the south and east, it runs between low banks across a level plain. In modern times, engineers have built dams and levees to control it, but in the old days, the river changed course often. Its name comes from these changes in course. Tsal means loose, unfastened, unconnected, wandering, and homeless. Another meaning has been added in the last few years, since the People encountered humanity and the human concept of freedom, which does not (apparently) exist in any hwarhath *culture. Tsal is the word they use to translate the English word "free." This story, which may be (in part) about freedom, is set by the Loose or Homeless or Untethered or Free River.*

In the hwarhath *main language, there is no way to speak of people without mentioning their gender. The language has singular female, singular male, singular of undetermined gender, female plural, male plural, mixed plural, and undetermined plural. There is no mixed plural form of the word lover. Lovers are always both female or both male. The author of this story could have made up a mixed (i.e., heterosexual) form of the word. It would have been recognizable, and her readers would have been shocked. But for once she played it safe, or maybe she wanted her readers to come to the center of the story—its hearth or meaning—slowly. The title she gave the story, assuming that it was given by her and not by a nervous publisher, is best translated into English as "The Breeders." But this title doesn't sound right to humans and distorts the meaning of the story, which is, after all, about love.*

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ON BOOKS by Paul Di Filippo

1.

Saved from the Memory Hole

Chances are you read a great story five, ten, or fifteen years ago that you'd like to re-experience someday. Maybe you even remember who the author was (a surprisingly elusive datum, even among heavy-duty readers with good memories). But unless the story was an award-winner or included in a Year's Best anthology, you'll probably end up rummaging through an ill-sorted and incomplete collection of SF magazines, searching in vain for that one gem.

And the reason why? Publishers don't like issuing short-story collections.

It was not always thus. Particularly in the SF field, plentiful volumes assembling the short stories of both well- and lesser-known writers formed an important historical record, an invaluable—and pleasurable—resource for readers. Low-profile but intriguing writers such as Wyman Guin and Daniel Galouye had their work rescued from pulp oblivion (although others such as Robert Abernathy and Vance Aandahl never did, and as a consequence have undeservedly vanished from the new edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*). Both general readers and critics have benefitted whenever a new collection has appeared, as has the SF field as a whole.

Whether short-story collections are the money-losing dogs publishers claim them to be—or simply not sexy or blockbusterish enough—is a matter known for certain only to various accountants. What is generally known is that if you wish to read the collected short fiction of, say, Marc Laidlaw or Steve Utley or Robert Reed, you're plumb out of luck.

Happily, some publishers continue to issue single-author collections, although usually only in conjunction with a writer's novels. (Winning an award doesn't hurt either: just ask Lawrence Watt-Evans, for example.) But beggars can't be choosers, and we'll have to be content with the three volumes presented here, while continuing to hope for more.

One of the classiest purveyors of short fiction today is surely Arkham House books (rather fittingly for a firm which got its start collecting the stories of Lovecraft). Under the capable direction of James Turner, Arkham House produces beautifully crafted, definitive hardcover volumes which, taken as a series, are starting to constitute a tolerably complete history of late-twentieth-century SF.

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Their latest volume slots neatly into this picture.

The Aliens of Earth by Nancy Kress (327 pages, $20.95) should be welcomed by all *Asimov's* readers, since all but five of its eighteen stories derive from the pages of this magazine. You'll encounter pieces from 1986 on up to 1993 (an *Omni* appearance), all stamped with Kress's thoughtful, understated style. Read in the company of their siblings, the stories reveal a uniformity of vision, a wide range of characters and a depth of spirit not readily apparent, perhaps, in their time-scattered publications. (This kind of synergy is another attraction of single-author collections not available otherwise.)

As foreshadowed in its clever oxymoron of a title, Kress's collection concerns itself mostly with human oddities plentifully available in the here and now. A handful of stories venture offplanet or far into the future, and to my mind these are the weakest. "Cannibals" is a standard tale of quirky alien reproductive secrets observed by a damaged protagonist whose own interpersonal relations mirror somewhat the disastrous changes among the natives. "Touchdown" is a glimpse into a rather heartless post-holocaust game-playing culture. "And Wild For To Hold" concerns itself with the fruitful notion of abstracting pivotal "hostages" out of the past, but is rather vitiated by being framed in a baroque timestream not our own. The exception to this pattern, however, is the beautiful "sequel" to the Cinderella story, "Spillage," whose wholly tactile medieval setting and believably rodential main characters are quiet triumph.

Where Kress generally excels, though, is in the other tales, those which feature gracefully drawn ordinary souls confronted with challenges that either break them or force them to push past what they assumed were their limits.

I recently read a partial definition of humanist-centered art as that which focuses on the courage, fallibility, and frailty of people. By this definition, Kress's work lies squarely and proudly in the humanist camp. (And a possible dig against overly cyberneticized fictions on page 153 only serves to confirm this basic stance: ". . . a movie . . . neither of them found funny, about people chasing and killing one another over something that fit inside a computer.")

The standouts in this vein are numerous, and it might almost be said that Kress is one of the current patent-holders on this type of homey yet twisted story, which deals with the real, sometimes bloody despair lying just beneath the surface of our familiar lives (which, as the main character of "Craps" discovers, can be surprisingly, even invigoratingly weird).

Take the strong opener, "The Price of Oranges," in which a worried grandfather uses a convenient time-portal in his closet to retrieve what he imagines to be a suitable suitor for his obnoxious po-mo granddaughter. Or "Phone Repairs," in which crossed wires highlight one man's failing marriage. Or "Philippa's Hands," which examines the slippery connections between martyrdom and neurotic withdrawal in the life of a

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haunted widow.

In one fine story after another, Kress conflates the personal and the public, inner lives mixing with "objective" reality. Perhaps the best example of this is how the concealed, half-remembered sexual abuse experienced by the nurse-narrator of "The Battle of Long Island" dovetails with the military secrecy surrounding the project she's assigned to, and with the nature of personal choice.

About the only time Kress comes a cropper with this strategy is in "Inertia." This blandly if accurately titled AIDS parable sets up its victims as wimpily noble and its oppressors as one-dimensionally evil, and is not helped by the fact that its basic McGuffin is full of holes: why would disease-carriers need to be recruited to spread a virus, if medical science has managed to culture the virus in order to create a vaccine?

But barring this failure and discounting relatively minor pieces such as "In Memoriam" and "People Like Us," Kress succeeds with nearly every try. Her stories start out with a sometimes deliberately mystifying leap into the void of the characters' predicaments and continue vividly, terminating in far-from-easy resolutions, mostly partial. Her language is always keenly chosen ("a jaw like an erection" is one typical fine figure of speech), and she is at ease with both male and female protagonists. (The story "In a World Like This" rings some interesting changes on the gender gap which show that Kress has plenty of empathy and understanding of both sexes.) And when she turns her skills to humor, she is capable of a sardonic piece like "Renaissance."

One final pleasure to be derived from this collection is Kress' playful, almost subliminal allusions to the great SF writers of the past who have plainly influenced her. "The Price of Oranges" recalls Jack Finney; "Cannibals" owes a debt to early Zelazny, especially "A Rose For Ecclesiastes"; "Philippa's Hands" is surely meant to suggest Sturgeon's "Bianca's Hands" (and in fact much of Kress is reminiscent of Sturgeon); "To Scale" clearly derives from Dick's "Small Town"; and "The Mountain To Mohammed" is a kind of Pohl-Kornbluth-Nourse blend.

The Aliens of Earth proves that home is indeed the strangest place of all.

The mixed collection of science fiction/science fact extends back at least as far as Frederik Pohl's *Digits and Dastards* (1966). When such volumes are done well, a reader finds himself oscillating—like some time-slipped Van Vogt protagonist—between the cerebral thrills of pop-science exposition and the emotional thrills of a storytelling which at its most synergistic might embody those very topics previously expounded on.

In *Dancing With Myself* (Baen Books, 366 pages, $4.99), Charles Sheffield has assembled just such a bootstrapping mechanism, and it's a pleasure to watch it assemble itself out of its vat of raw feedstock.

Sheffield the science-fact writer is concerned with a number of things: mathematics (shades of the Pohl book), nuclear winter, chaos theory, and cosmology. But what interests—even plagues—him most

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of all is quantum physics and its unresolved paradoxes. As he himself says on page 310: "Putting together a collection like this reveals to a writer his or her own obsessions. I see appearing again and again here one of my own convictions: that the biggest problem in physics today is the problem of space-time." Like a specter, the undetermined—perhaps undeterminable—essential nature of the very fabric of our universe—something most of us give nary a thought to—permeates Sheffield's fact and fiction, giving rise, as we shall soon see, to speculations verging on metaphysics and theology.

As a popularizer of science, Sheffield has an easy touch. His light humor and wry detachment are perfect for elucidating the possibilities of comet strikes capable of eliminating humanity. His skepticism about the potential value of chaos theory is a welcome antidote to all the hype that field has received. And in his earnest bafflement about how to resolve quantum theory with gravity, about whether the fine structure of the universe is a boiling sea of twelve-space knots, and about the implications of "spooky action at a distance," Sheffield reveals that, like many cutting-edge physicists, he has no trepidation about venturing into areas generally reserved for monks and mystics. It is no accident that the final pages of this book end up trying to prove this postulate: "The existence of God depends on the existence of a sufficient amount of missing matter in the universe."

The title of the rather Rudy-Ruckerish story "Godspeed," in which a lone inventor brings on himself the unwelcome attentions of aliens and the possible collapse of a small piece of the universe, refers to an FTL drive. FTL travel by subverting quantum uncertainties is also the theme of "C-Change" (whose kicker resembles Vernor Vinge's notion of a galactic "Slow Zone") and of "The Double Spiral Staircase"; the latter also hinges on some ingenious biological speculation. But the most startling congruence of physics and metaphysics occurs in "Nightmares of the Classical Mind," which just might be one of the best Ballard stories Ballard never wrote.

From its opening sentence ("We had come to re-animate a corpse") through its cast of dissolute characters (a rotter of a narrator named "Jimmy"!), to its depiction of media hypnosis and its array of Ballardian tropes (abandoned installations, neurotic scientists), this story masterfully evokes some of the same frissons of, say, "Terminal Beach" without falling into parody or theft. Sheffield's hallucinogenic reification of the "many-worlds" theory of splitting timelines is masterful, and the sense of pre-fated doom which the story's ending evokes is truly sobering.

To say that this collection also contains the cyberpunkish "Out of Copyright," the Lovecraftian duet "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine?" and "The Courts of Xanadu," the wistful mood-piece "The Seventeen-Year Locusts," and the best individual-becomes-the-world story since Brian Aldiss's "Let's Be Frank" (the title piece) is to merely hint at Sheffield's range.

As Sheffield the scientist dances

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with Sheffield the dreamer, we can only watch with the same kind of admiration we bestow on a gravity-defying Rogers-Astaire waltz.

In his elegaic and disturbing introduction to Dan Simmons's 1990 collection of short stories, *Prayers to Broken Stones,* Harlan Ellison made much of Simmons's stature as a "real writer," one "doomed to spend the rest of [his] life at this lonely and holy profession." Clearly identifying on a personal level with Simmons and his writing ("I have been where Dan Simmons is now, and I have been where he will be soon enough."), Ellison cast the subject of his foreword as the quintessential Byronic figure of our time.

Now, being Byron is clearly one way of living and writing, and perhaps one of the most famous and attractive to those who don't have to personally endure it. It is a way of painfully co-existing with one's craft that Ellison plainly endorses—or feels he is possessed by—above all others. The Romantic existence and esthetic is one that values passion, melancholy, obsession, and a sense of doomed futility above, say, playfulness, spirituality, nonsense, and cheerfulness. Gothic elements predominate over scientific ones, and intensity is always favored over laidback hipness. Consequently, Ellison's definition of what makes a "real" writer has no way of encompassing figures such as Borges, Pynchon, and Calvino (on one end of the spectrum) or Sax Rohmer, Arthur C. Clarke, and Thorne Smith (on the other).

The question at hand today, with the appearance of Dan Simmons's new collection of five novellas under the rubric *Lovedeath* (Warner, 336 pages, $19.95), is this: does Dan Simmons subscribe to this view of himself and his work?

Based on this volume, and factoring in Simmons's love of another doomed romantic by the name of Keats, one would have to say yes.

Although these five stories expertly run the gamut from mainstream to SF to horror to pure myth to something akin to George MacDonald-ish fantasy (if MacDonald had collaborated with Stephen Crane), all rest on the same bedrock philosphy. Life is a vale of tears. Only an individual's strength of character can help him, and God—if He even exists—has no mercy on he who wavers. Women are the Other, both lamia and lover, vampire and nurse. Betrayal and treachery are everywhere. Each victory has a price.

Now, there is no point in debating how well such beliefs conform to actual "reality." As long as the author honestly subscribes to them, they can be just as valid a blueprint for creating art as any other set. If the writer recognizes his obsessions—and I think that Simmons does; just read his own foreword to this volume—he can to some extent control them instead of being controlled by them, a crucial prerequisite for crafting a story that actually fulfills its author's intentions.

Lovedeath opens with "Entropy's Bed at Midnight," and its initial recollection of a fatal highway accident sets the tone for the whole collection. Peppered liberally with flashbacks, as is the next piece

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(leading naturally enough to the fourth story being called "Flashback"), this story concerns a man nearly paralyzed by the inevitability and randomness of death. How he eventually reconciles love with unfettering those loved is neatly dramatized in a final image of his daughter accelerating away from him down an amusement park-type ride as he throttles back and lets her go.

Simmons is always adept at objectifying his anxieties, and the next story is the prime example of his skills at making horrors crystal-clear. "Dying in Bangkok" is reminiscent of Lucius Shepherd's south-of-the-border decadence, of William Vollmann's writings about Asia and hookers, and of Philip Jose Farmer's *Blown* and *A Feast Unknown*. In conceiving a vampire that favors a wildly sexual method of attack, Simmons has opted for visceral impact over strict plausibility. After all, there are easier ways of getting a pint of blood from a victim than the one described, especially if the hunter doesn't care about the long-term survival of his prey, as the *phanyaa mahn naga kio* seem not to. But no more feasible predator in accordance with rational Darwinism would pack the emotional punch of what Simmons imagines.

This story reveals a minor flaw connected with the Romantic esthetic, and that is the desire to include something simply because "that's the way it happened." The attack by the Thai government on its students which Simmons mentions from time to time in "Dying" has nothing to do with his main theme. It offers no parallel to the actions of the vampires or the motives of the protagonist, isn't even very tone-setting, and the story would have been just as compulsively readable without a single mention of doomed students. But because, as Simmons details in his foreword, he actually experienced the reality he feels compelled to include it. Not a wise move.

"Sleeping with Teeth Women" is a good place to bring up the issue of first-person narration. Four of the five stories in *Lovedeath* involve the technique, and Simmons is generally quite good at fitting inside the skin of his narrators. If they all bear a family resemblance, it's due to their sharing the Romantic worldview already outlined. The elderly Amerindian storyteller of "Teeth Women" owns perhaps the most distinctive voice, and Simmons does a good job conveying both the world-weary attitude of the present-day old man and the way his tone changes when he's speaking of the lost world of the "free humans," before the coming of the Fat Takers. The story itself exhibits much of the charm—although not the same level of allegorical resonance—as a legend inexplicably omitted from a Joseph Campbell collection. (And Simmons displays a peculiar if suicidal courage in the face of militant feminism by including a story involving *vagina dentata* right after one involving deadly succubi.)

"Flashback" feels like something of a misfit among its four horrific or fantastical companions. A competent cyberpunk scenario about a debilitating new drug, it features some uneasy Japan-bashing and a delightfully nasty offhand parody

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of what seems to me to be Scientology. Only slightly removed from today's headlines, it offers a picture of America more monitory than predictive.

Simmons saves the best tale for last. Surrounded by mock scholarly apparatus, cast in diary form, "The Great Lover" convincingly builds up the character of James Edwin Rooke, poet of the Great War, and his experiences therein. Expertly mixing and reassembling real poems from such figures as Sassoon and Brooke as samples of Rooke's work, Simmons makes us believe—one of the most difficult fictional tasks—that we are inhabiting the consciousness of an artist. Rooke's eerie battlefield encounters with an enticing female figure who could pass for Robert Graves's White Goddess culminates in a transfiguration of the protagonist from Byronic (Byron is an explicit touchstone in this story) to someone more Thomas Mertonish, perhaps portending or shadowing a similar opening in Simmons's own life and work. Lastly in this piece, the Romantic's somewhat paranoid inclination toward seeing a hostile universe where even one's own body is oftentimes traitorously another opponent (a disposition shared by horror writers in general) finds perfect rationale in the trenches of France, where the whole world is indeed assembled against the soldier, and the body betrays both in life and even as a rat-ridden corpse.

Impassioned, unflinching, Dan Simmons might not turn out to be the Byron of the 1990s—but who wants him to die young and lonely in Greece anyhow?

Original anthologies provide the opportunity for stories to skip a transient magazine appearance and leap directly to somewhat more memorable and durable book form. This ostensible benefit is somewhat negated as collections of virginal tales bud like brewer's yeast ("Did I read that story in *Wild Thieves IX* or *Hellcat Heroes XII*?"). Also, the virtues of the single-author collection outlined above are naturally absent.

And when the collection is a theme anthology such as *Frankenstein: The Monster Wakes*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg (DAW Books, 352 pages, $4.99), other factors emerge.

In the best case, the stories in such a book can fruitfully intersect and build on each other. In the worst, they might repeat and replow the same overworked ground. And in both cases, a minor diminution of surprise is an unfortunate concomitant: we know before bending back the cover that every story in this particular volume, for instance, is going to bring Doc F. or his creation onstage, one way or another. It's hard to be too much shocked by the *nth* appearance of a tall stitched figure lurching from the shadows. . . .

Frankenstein is neither the worst nor best case. There are plenty of decent stories here —enough to make the book a gratifying purchase—as well as a few excellent ones and a number of apprentice efforts disfigured by the occasional solecism, unproductive shift in POV and self-defeating misconstruction. I'll single out the finest pieces in a moment, while leaving the clunkers and journey-

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man efforts undifferentiated (as a fun test of your own taste and perspicacity). What's more interesting to me is to look at the patterns among the stories.

Most striking is the relative solemnity of the entries. Although editor Greenberg mentions *Young Frankenstein* in his introduction, there's not a single gonzo story in the volume. Not one writer took the challenge of subverting the legend with humor. I would have liked to see at least one story told from, say, a Marty-Feldmanlike Igor's perceptions. Unfortunately, the authors seem all rather stifled by the sacred place of the original text in the SF pantheon.

The majority of the stories take place in various twentieth century venues, ranging from Hollywood to Coney Island to a mobster's hideout. The kick here, of course, is in seeing how Frankenstein's monster might fit into modern life. (Does that satellite dish really conceal revivifying apparatus?) From lofty observer to degraded drunkard, sex-crazed to ascetic, that which once arose from the slab in the lab acts out the roles humanity forces on him. All the authors also gratifyingly hew more or less faithfully to the original written text rather than any movie version, inserting many flashbacks and allusions to canonical events, leading to not a little overlap in such areas as Arctic exile.

And as one might have predicted, the monster receives more play than his creator. Only a couple of stories adopt the perspective of the creator, whether the original or a counterpart. The dramatic possibilities—and the sympathy—seem to be all on the monster's side.

Five authors chose to set their stories in more remote times, and two of these are among the real winners.

Barbara Paul's "The Comfort of Walls" picks up the monster within the original novel's purview. (Doc F. yet lives.) Its first-person narration by the monster is beautifully stylized, yet utterly believable. Her symbolic use of various types of walls gradually escalates to a shattering crescendo, and her gift for parable is enviable.

"Cyrano" by Gary A. Braunbeck is my favorite entry. Placing the monster on an archetypical Ship of Fools populated wth various nineteenth-century fictional characters, the story is marked by wit, surrealism, and mystery, culminating in the revelation of the monster's only possible bride, a revelation able to be fully appreciated only by those familiar with the short stories of a certain multigabled, scarlet-lettered N. H.

The final standout is Brian Hodge's "A Loaf of Bread, A Jug of Wine," which takes the retroactively obvious notion of the monster as Christ and works it deftly out amid the horrors of World War II.

Perhaps this collection might be smartly packaged with Michael Bishop's forthcoming novel of Frankenstein as ballplayer, *Brittle Innings*?

2.

Everything in the *Weekly World News* is True!

Remember those malevolent yet

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obtuse aliens whom Keith Laumer's Retief was always humorously outwitting? Suppose you interbred them with those trash-classic Whitley Streiber bug-eyed neurotic saucer-rapists, spliced in a few nucleotides from de Camp's ground-breaking *Rogue Queen,* and knighted the resulting creature with a leftover coke-spoon from the estate of Philip K. Dick?

You might just come up with the unique creations who inhabit Patricia Anthony's second novel: *Brother Termite* (Harcourt, Brace, 250 pages, $21.95).

The year is roughly 2050, the setting a culturally static America where the White House chief of staff is Brother Termite, an alien named Reen. He and his relatives arrived on Earth a hundred years ago, circa 1948. All those UFO reports which began then were true. And the government *was* covering up. Truman signed a treaty, you see. The aliens would remain hidden, not cause mass disruption, in exchange for the power to pull some strings. And pull they have, in effect secretly writing contemporary history as we know it. This covenant remained in effect for fifty years. Then the aliens emerged. And they have ruled jointly with humans for another five decades.

Long-lived, Reen has seen it all. The single (and singular) point of view in the book, Reen is a consistently and brilliantly realized individual. We experience all of the book's non-stop, slam-bang action through his 300 degrees of vision, sharing his elation, fear, sympathy, and guilt.

Guilt most massively, since Reen and his weak yet connivingly powerful hive-mates have secretly sterilized the human race.

Having "wiped every sentient race but the humans off the face of the galaxy" (a bit of hyperbole, one must suppose, but still indicative of their nature), the Cousins are now finishing up the job, but not before utilizing stolen human genes to supplement their own wasted heritage in a breeding program that calls to mind such classics as Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos.*

All of this is mere background, delivered subtly and teasingly over the first eighty pages or so. The real story occupies the space of only a few days, as all the multiplex plotting of two factions of aliens and two of human come to a bloody end. Part murder mystery, part political thriller, part love story, the plot is a duplicitous roller-coaster of a type that could only be held together by its overarching SF conceit. The intermeshing components of the book are so fluid that it's a marvel to watch. An example: early on, we're told in a seemingly innocuous aside that Reen has trouble interpreting the dial of an analog watch. Midway through the book, he mistakes the hour inconsequentially. But the third time, during the book's climax, more dire results unfold.

Anthony's other achievements here are manifold. She makes us believe in the plausibility of the whole wacked-out scenario, whose political outlines (and at times, its dialogue) resemble such paranoia-treachery trips as Dick's *The Penultimate Truth.* She renders Reen and his hive-mates as convincingly

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alien (they can't stand touching or chaotic visual patterns; and, like the Martians of Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land,* are advised by their departed Old Ones), yet touchingly human. (In fact, the aliens are soon revealed to have been devastatingly contaminated by human thought patterns, in the archetypical manner of conquerors enslaved by the conquered.) And she depicts the terrible emotional cost of loving—interspecies or otherwise—and its bittersweet rewards.

In addition to Dick, two eminent female stylists come to mind while reading Anthony: Kit Reed and Carol Emshwiller. *Brother Termite* resembles—in its strong female characters and its familial concerns set amidst SF tropes—some of the fabulations of those two forerunners. And in its climactic scene which subverts traditional phallic symbolism, Anthony slaps down some witty post-feminist cards.

But the book's main virtue is grasped perhaps only after closing it. Then, with a little reflection, it becomes apparent that the whole work is also a simple allegory for our current global fix. How does the mess the aliens have caused really differ significantly from our current predicament?

Are you sure David Gergen is really human?

Could you work hand-in-hand with both Reagan *and* Clinton?

Reen could.

3.

Central Park is Melting in the Dark

Here's a great SF scenario for you, gratis.

We're visiting a world whose inhabitants are poised on the verge of bursting forth into space. Its technology is sufficiently advanced to make their globe a Utopia, although there are still vast pockets of inequality. But this world's two leading countries are locked in a suicidal military competition, and one of them is also fighting a war against an almost pre-industrial tribe. Meanwhile, back in the home country of the aggressors, the citizens are becoming inexplicably discontented with their affluence. People of all ages and classes are starting to abandon their possessions, becoming wandering mystics and sensualists, fueled in part by chemical mind-altering substances newly invented in labs or organic ones newly borrowed from other cultures, or sometimes just off the heady Zeitgeist. Messiahs and politicians battle for support as the dedicated cadre of techies struggle to escape gravity, and there are riots in the streets among a suppressed underclass long treated as a different species.

Maybe it's a bit derivative, true. Sounds like a mix of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed,* Herbert's *Dune,* and Asimov's "Nightfall."

But it's even more derivative than that.

Because it actually happened.

The description above, of course, is nothing more than a straightforward synopsis of America's Sixties, perhaps the most stefnal decade till the advent of the present one, which yet unfolds. In retrospect—and, to a lesser degree, while we were actually living it—the ten years from 1963 to 1972

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were the realtime enactment of a hundred SF daydreams and nightmares. Apocalypse and salvation alternated the upper hand daily, and the transmogrification of humanity seemed closer than the pages of *Childhood's End.*

Now, one of our field's most evocative writers has managed to capture a good portion of these sensations in a book which, while strictly a mainstream novel, still manages to impart many of the same reading pleasures most of us find in science fiction, while also delivering the goods we associate with the finest lyrical realistic fiction.

Bruce Boston's *Stained Glass Rain* (Ocean View Books, PO Box 102650, Denver, CO 80250, 460 pages, $13.95) is the story of four main characters: David Jacobi, Christine Leslie, Michael Shawtry, and Dennis Mulligan. An earnest, somewhat self-deluding seeker; a divorced aspiring poet and absentee mother; a self-denying ascetic who eventually turns his own wracked body into the poem he can't write; and a professional trickster who acts as catalyst and precipitate. These four dance around each other in the archetypical self-absorbed and introspective gavotte of the decade. (The intimately detailed love affair between David and Christine is the relationship most deeply explored.) Besides being fully fleshed individuals with pasts and scars, they represent various stances toward the changes sweeping over them. Alternately embracing and rejecting, inviting and disdaining the opportunities offered by the times, each one rises and falls in intricate emotional cycles.

Set mostly in Manhattan, its by turns humorous, touching and wrenching events propelled by vast quantities of drugs—particularly the as-yet legal LSD-25—*Rain* is not overtly a fabulation, save for a few incidents of possible telepathy and "shared dreaming." Yet, just as we call Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* fantasy for its feel, despite a lack of extranatural events, so must Boston's book ultimately come to closely resemble SF. Not only are his major metaphors those of technology (starting on the first page with the veins in Christine's throat that resemble "electronic circuitry" to Michael's imagined absorption of the solar system on page 345), but the whole novel stands as a depiction of a culture so far distant in time and attitude from the present that it's effectively an alien one. And both the highly sensual drug trips and Michael's descent into madness read as PKD-style explorations of alternate modes of perceptions, where the universe is suddenly revealed to be other than what is commonly understood.

As an outstanding poet, of course, Boston writes like a demon with a stained glass hand. To begin to quote the many lovely metaphors and vivid imagery found here is to encounter the essence of frustration, since practically each page yields a bumper crop of beauty. Not a formally experimental novel, *Rain* still reads as a daring work due to the uncommon, yet pellucid depth of its language.

Reminiscent at times of Delany's memoir, *Heavenly Breakfast,* of actual '60's artifacts such as Larner's

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Drive, He Said and Farina's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me,* and of many a Truffaut film (think *Jules and Jim*), *Stained Glass Rain* is that rarest of novels, one so steeped in its milieu, one whose author has so deeply remembered/imagined his characters and period, that the reader is effectively given the controls of a technicolor time machine.

As we used to sing as kids, when the public-safety ad came on, "Buckle up for safety, buckle up!"

4.

From Middle Earth to Pern and Beyond

SF art books used to be a rarity. While still only slightly less scarce than an orc's good deeds, they are a little more abundant than of old, and two new ones are available now.

Tolkien's World (HarperCollins, 132 pages, $25.00) is a collection of Middle-Earthian illustrations culled, it appears (lack of prior publication credits is one of two minor quibbles, the other being nonexistent pagination), from several years of Tolkien calendars and from an illustrated edition of the trilogy. But not a little care and intelligence has been expended on surrounding these old images with supporting material, which makes the volume more than the sum of its parts.

The main matter of the book is capped up front with a short biography of Tolkien himself, and at the back by first-person essays by the nine artists involved: Inger Edelfeldt, Carol Emery Phenix, Tony Galuidi, Roger Garland, Robert Goldsmith, Michael Hague, John Howe, Alan Lee, and Ted Naismith. Additionally, each painting is presented in approximate textual sequence, accompanied by an appropriate snippet of Tolkien's prose.

For old-time fans, *Tolkien's World* presents no surprises, but is a charming reminder of the pleasures to be had in the original volumes. Having not picked up the books myself in nearly twenty-five years, I was re-astounded at the breadth and completeness of Tolkien's invention as portrayed by these talented folks.

With so many different artists, one might expect a clash of styles, but such does not occur, at least not to any great degree. The paintings generally complement each other quite well, although Galuidi's two are an exception, their rather flat and cartoony surfaces failing to mesh with, say Lee's impressionistic washes, Edelfeldt's Carl-Larsson-ish tableaus, and Hague's Rackham-inspired canvases.

My personal favorite among these diverse offerings are the paintings of Ted Naismith. Equally adept at portraying underground architectural immensities or deeply detailed hobbit-proportioned landscapes, possessing a palette that ranges from the Parrish tones of "Riders at the Ford" to the masterful grey-greens of "Under the Spell of the Barrow-wight," Naismith seems to have opened a window directly onto Tolkien's subcreation.

The Art of Michael Whelan (Bantam Spectra, 200 pages, $60.00) represents the flipside of the Tolkien book. From many artists representing one vision, we jump to

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one artist representing many visions: both those of assorted SF writers and his own independent glimpses of alternate iconic realities.

"Newcomer" Whelan has been painting professionally for twenty years now, and this luxurious, lovingly designed volume offers an emphasis on work from the '80's and '90's. Divided into two halves —"Scenes" and "Visions"—representing respectively commissioned work and idiosyncratic private paintings, the book also includes many sketches and studies, as well as two interviews with Whelan and the artist's revelatory comments about each piece.

From the text emerges a portrait of this artist as pre-eminently sane, dedicated, hard-working, introspective, and eager to continue to hone his skills, however much approbation he currently merits. As Whelan is the first to admit, he is a calculating, deliberate painter in the best sense of the words. There are no "accidents" in his work. Fascinating technical and professional arcana are also disclosed, and the pain of the occasional humiliations, false starts, and disappointments is shared.

As for the actual paintings, many of them familiar as unfortunately diminished book covers—well, they are best savored en masse in this large format. Then, you begin to realize how painstaking and scrupulous a painter Whelan is, how willing to try new things, and (something unnoticed previously by me) the importance of symbolism in his ostensibly ultra-realistic scenes. In this parade of luscious, lavish worlds, one can see traces of Giger ("The Apotheosis of War"), Bosch ("Arise"), Escher (the spiraling birds in "L'Echelle"), and Magritte ("Gloaming"), all fully digested and transfigured into Whelan's own instantly recognizable handiwork.

And when you've become temporarily sated with this gallery of pictures that have done so much to visually define the landscapes and characters of modern SF, you can even play the game of trying to locate Whelan's hidden signature-sigil in each!

5.

The Music of Spasmodics

This past Halloween in my town (and I assume across the nation), you could purchase a rubber full-head mask that made you look like a Crash Dummy, those chatty car-testing automatons. As a human masquerading as a dummy masquerading as a human, you would have been living out the main thesis of critic Arthur Kroker's book *Spasm: Virtual Reality, Android Music and Electric Flesh* (St. Martin's Press, 177 pages, $19.95, including a 57-minute audio-CD).

Kroker, for those who haven't encountered his work before, is one of those semotician/guerilla deconstructionists who, like his more famous counterpart Jean Baudrillard, bear more than a tenuous connection to SF. (Testifying to which is the Bruce Sterling introduction to this volume.) Jacked in, their nervous systems replaced by co-ax and optical fibers, they apply SF tropes and tools to the flux of everyday reality most of the rest of us are too preoccupied to notice, with frequently stimulating results.

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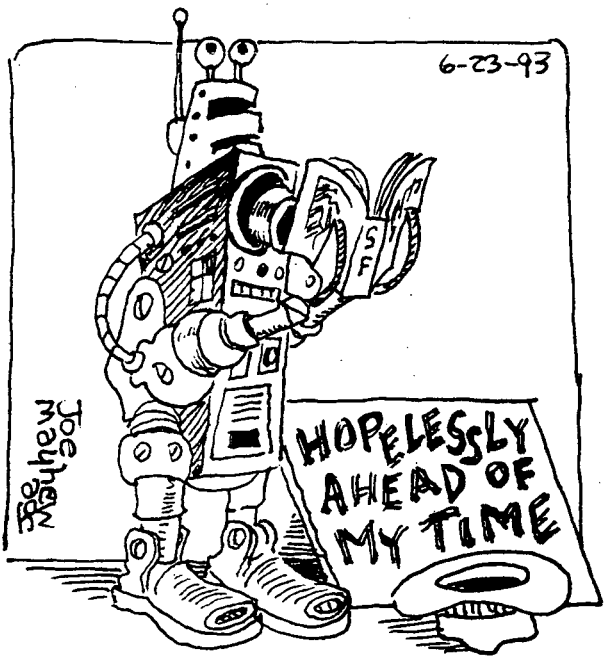
If it's possible to fix Kroker's hallucinogenic tongue long enough to pin down his subject matter in this book, we could simplistically say that it's the (im)possibility of generating the signal of Art amid media noise and audience inattention. Kroker mixes rather straightforward (for him) reportage on the catastrophic machines of David Therrien, head of the Ice House in Phoenix, Arizona, and the photography of Montreal's Linda Dawn Hammond with great bloody gobs of eminently quotable and sardonically assertive theorizing ("... memory is the first sampler machine.").

The lengthy Chapter Six is written by Steve Gibson, the creator behind the accompanying musical CD, and is a cut-by-cut description of his methodology, which relies almost exclusively on sampling techniques. Although Kroker claims that his co-conspirator has produced "the world's first post-referential sound-object," most musically aware listeners, while enjoying the sometimes assaultive, sometimes lulling tracks, will not be particularly overwhelmed. Recombinant traces of New Order, Emergency Broadcast Network, Big Audio Dynamite, techno, and house all spill out of the speakers in a competent but far from earth-shattering mix.

Still, this might be just the background music for your next Halloween Crash Dummy, thrash-chummy mosh. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Memorial Day is always a big con(vention) weekend—and there's not much letup on into June. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

MAY 1994

27-29—**ConQuest.** For info, write: **Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64111.** Or phone: **(816) 923-9834** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Kansas City MO (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Park Place Hotel. Guests will include: S. Brust, artist D. Cherry, P. Cadigan, fan L. Bishop.

26-29—**EuROcon. (40-96) 136-731.** Timisoara, Romania. Originally planned for the Czech Republic.

27-29—**OmniCon. (503) 648-1042.** Red Lion Jantzen Beach, Portland OR. Star Trek. Robert O'Reilly.

27-30—**SiliCon. (703) 642-2572.** Howard Johnsons, Norfolk VA. "How SF is becoming Science Fact."

27-30—**InConCeivable.** Tudor Court Motel, Draycott (Derby) England. Theme: Humor in SF & Fantasy.

27-30—**DisClave.** Sheraton Premiere, Tysons Corner VA, near Washington DC. Bujold, S. V. Johnson.

27-30—**BayCon. (415) 968-7919.** Red Lion Hotel, San Jose CA. Duane, Sternbach, Morwood, Freas.

27-30—**MediaWestCon. (517) 372-0738.** Holiday Inn South, Lansing MI. For fanzine fans. No guests.

27-30—**Three Rivers Game Fair. (216) 673-2117.** Pittsburgh PA. Gaming meet, including SF/fantasy.

JUNE 1994

3-5—**DucKon. (708) 665-4099.** Hyatt, Lisle IL. Theme: Mad Scientists. Techies especially invited.

3-6—**New Zealand National Con.** Bentley's (Alglen) Hotel, Dunedin NZ. Barbara Hambly, Tom Cardy.

4-5—**WilfCon. (519) 743-9485.** Waterloo ON. Artist John Platt. Ghost of Honour: Susan Wood.

4-5—**LanternCon. (701) 235-4329.** Seven Seas Motor Inn, Mandan (near Bismarck) ND. Comic book con.

10-12—**Mad Media, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-8850.** M. Jittlov. No unaccompanied kids.

10-12—**TunnelCon, 3492 Montego Dr., Las Vegas NV 89121.** Stardust Hotel. Beauty & Beast TV show.

10-12—**ConTata, % Box 1265, New York NY 10274.** Days Hotel, Secaucus NJ. SF/fantasy folksinging.

10-12—**Ozmopolitan, VanderNoot, 1343 Del Norte, Houston TX 77018. (713) 688-6807.** Rosemont IL.

17-19—**VulKon. 12237 SW 50, Cooper City FL 33330. (305) 434-6060.** Orlando FL. Nimoy. Commercial.

17-19—**Ad Astra, Box 7276, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. (416) 454-5499.** deCamps, Duane, Morwood.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-9494.** WorldCon. $125/C$165 to 7/15/94.

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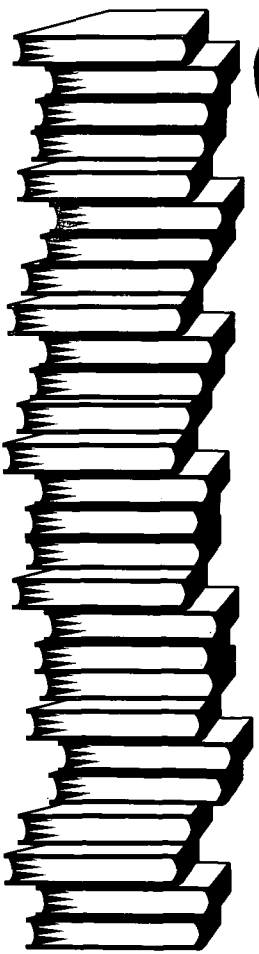

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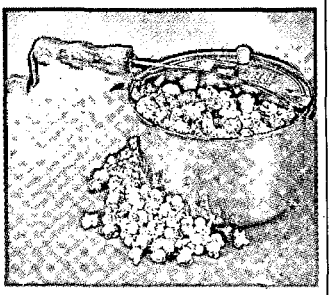

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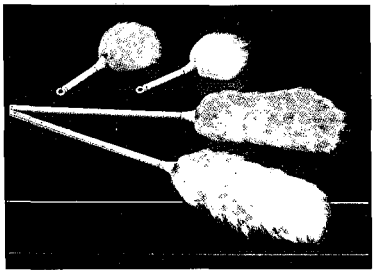

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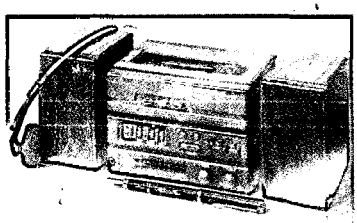

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